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Sly Ballades in Harvard China.

The love of a lifetime

Caroline Gardiner Cary Curtis

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THE LOVE OF A LIFETIME.

CHAPTER I.

SATURDAY EVENING.

My dear old friend, you're very wise,
We always are with others' eyes,
And see *so* clear (our neighbor's deck on),
What reef the idiot's sure to wreck on.

— LOWELL.

SUNDAY in a country town, thirty years or more ago, was a dispensation to be received by the young people of the parish with patience, since nothing could come of taking it in any other way. If anything could lighten its gloom, it was to look back on Saturday night's practising in the choir, with the addition of a faint hope that, if mother and father could be avoided in the porch, there might be a stroll home with somebody when afternoon service should be over.

As I look back to it, I do not know if that old Portsea church was in reality a very venerable building. Perhaps it is that my own youth

seems so very far back in the dark ages, or that the grave, plain building, with no association except of prayer and preaching, — no modern vestry with parlor and kitchen where an earthly paradise of sociability reigns, — has a memory like the elders of one's childhood, whom we can never imagine as having had personal experience of our unreasonable tears and follies. There it stood, solitary on its grassy slope, one straight and narrow path leading to the wide porch, which swallowed us up out of the pleasant sunshine.

In summer weather the sound of the regular splash and tinkle of the sea, as the tide ran up the beach and slid back again, was as soothing as the many-headed sermon of the old clergyman, — so soothing that our only means of keeping awake lay in such forms of activity as the big square pew afforded. There was a railing round the top of each pew, made, as I remember it, of round wooden knobs strung upon a rod. When the temptation to see how near our fingers could come to Deacon Allen's bald head, without actually touching it, as he sat in front of us, became more than we could bear,

I and my fellow-imps had recourse to counting these knobs. The possibility of our tumbling off the seat during these diversions must have effectually prevented the guardian of our pew from losing herself in the interest of the sermon, — always supposing that she found it as interesting as she would have had us believe.

I am told that there is really no such instrument known in music as a bombadoon. I can only say that we, as children, must have had great power of language so to christen the combination of wood and cat-gut which led the village choir, for no other word could so well express the sounds which came from its depths. First, such a roar as might be given to hurry up the stragglers at the last day ; then a low growl, bearing the same relation to music that the last grate of the runners on bare ground does to the delicious sense of flying through the air the day after the first snow-storm.

I said, “led the choir,” you will observe, not “accompanied it ;” for the village blacksmith, who was supposed to have control over this mighty instrument, marched boldly on, bow in hand, well in front of any tune which may have

been chosen, producing here a boom, there a growl, while singers, male and female, kept well in the rear, rather avoiding contact with such notes as the bombadoon might consent to give forth, but hitting in with a line at those intervals when it kept a sullen silence in spite of the beseeching fiddle-bow.

But the church on a hot, sleepy Sunday, or a cold, shivery one, was a very different place from the dimly-lighted gallery where, on a choir-practising night, hymns were sometimes sung under circumstances which well might excuse an occasional false note. When, for instance, a jealous bass might lose his place in the complications of a new tune, while wondering whether his too-fascinating soprano, whose voice and his ill-luck had sent to the other end of the seat, did not show signs of the sudden pressure of a tenor hand.

Portsea was not without its excitements,—sewing-circles in the winter, clam-bakes on the beach in summer, and huskings in the autumn. These were each pleasant as their season came; but then they included young and old,—elderly eyes which caught sight of

a surreptitious hand-squeeze as quickly as of a dropped stitch in somebody else's knitting, — so that the larkiest of the girls knew beforehand, that for the sake of future chances, it behooved her to be on her best behavior at these public gatherings. Saturday evening was especially the occasion of the young people, and seats in the choir always stood at a premium; for, though there was a sprinkling of elders there, they were too much occupied with finding their own way through difficult passages to pay much heed to the whispers and signs which went on about them. No wonder, then, if the choir-practising was a thing to be planned for all the week, and that wonders of work were accomplished on Saturday; younger brothers and sisters were often swept to bed with a tyrant hand almost before the sun went down, that their elder sister might be dressed and waiting at the gate.

Of all the choir-singers none felt a more agitating uncertainty through the baking and scrubbing of Saturday than pretty Martha Symmes; and yet she had no complications of careworn mother or herd of younger chil-

dren. With only her father and grandmother to keep house for, her life looked like a very easy one, — that is to say, to any one who did not know Grandma Parker, — and on this particular Saturday life had gone very hard with Martha. Generally grandma bestowed a part of every day on a visit to her other granddaughter, Mrs. Gardner, who having received the diploma of marriage was supposed to know dust when she saw it, and to be capable of mixing a batch of bread without being told how inferior she was to all of her race who had gone before. And yet marriage was the one iniquity of which Martha was supposed to be most capable, with an ingenious mixing up of hints as to the improbability of any one's wanting her, and the cruelty it would be to leave her poor old grandmother, who had slaved out her life for her. To-day grandma's rheumatism had been too bad to allow her to go out, and Martha had done all her Saturday's work under fire. And now the final touch had been reached, the polishing of the floor of the kitchen, where all the baking of pies and frying of crullers had been done that morning, without leaving a spot visi-

ble to any but the sharp eyes twinkling over by the window. But Martha scrubbed away as if she were rubbing out the traces of centuries, and sang very softly to herself for company, — not a loud, joyful song, as she felt like doing, but a low hum, lest grandma should suppose she was enjoying herself to an unlawful degree. And, indeed, she did feel very happy; for the day's work was nearly over, and it seemed as if nothing now could interfere with her being quite ready when Reuben Wilson should come for her at half-past seven to walk to the church. Her sister Abby had promised to come punctually to relieve guard with grandma, so there would be nothing more to encounter than the usual amount of grumbling which must be bestowed on any outing of Martha's. Stop! there was one possibility: supposing Lucy Jane Carter should have set her heart, too, on walking with Reuben. Reuben had asked Martha last Sunday; but Lucy Jane was quite capable of arranging matters so that she should be turning out of her gate just as Reuben came by on his way to Martha. And as she thought of the dreadful possibility of Lucy Jane as a third, she

took a fresh supply of soap and sand with a pensive air which her grandmother caught and resented, as showing a want of interest in her labors.

"Marthy Symmes, air you a-goin' to wash right round the legs of that table just to save yourself a little trouble?"

"Why, no, grandma," Martha said; "I'll move the table just as soon as I get as far as that."

"Well, then, you'd ought to a-ben' as far as that a good while ago. You'd get on a deal faster if you'd stop that hummin' an' sizzlin'; it sets my narves all on edge. I'd sooner you'd roar right out any time."

"I'm so sorry, grandma. I was only just running over the hymns we are going to practise to-night. But I won't sing a bit more if it worries you."

Grandma's sniff was withering.

"Very considerate you air, all to wonst. 'Taint the worryin'; that I'm used to; but the takin' them holy tunes in vain. Sally Baxter you air, all over; an' I can't say no wuss to you than that, Marthar-Ranne."

When grandma called her "Marthar-Anne," and brought forward the mythical Sally Baxter, who represented any iniquity that might be the topic of conversation, Martha knew that the rheumatism must be very bad, and that she would suffer for every twinge.

"Never you mind, Martha, my duck," her father had told her. "No wonder grandma can't help a-naggin' poor Sally Baxter, for I've heerd tell that Sally took the man grandma wanted right from under her very nose. He wan't no great of a find after all, so they say; and grandma hadn't no call to begrudge Sally the havin' him. Land sakes, Martha! you and I both catch it when there's a breeze blowin'; but I daresay grandma knows what's good for us. Her scoldin's like yaller soap, — fuss' rate for the complect, but it hurts when it gets into your eyes."

So Martha, who had the tenderest heart in the world, always tried to keep in mind the lost lover as well as the rheumatic pains; and it is odd, that the more tender a woman is, the more she enjoys an unhappy love story. Sallie Baxter was intended to be used as a danger-signal;

but Martha gathered from all her grandmother's comments on her old rival's sinfulness that she must have been very pretty in her day. As she was a cousin, Martha shrewdly surmised that it might be an inheritance of some of Sally's pretty ways that made herself sometimes such an offence to her grandmother.

When the old lady said, "Marthar-Anne! what do you stand frizzlin' yourself before the looking-glass for? You'd better take that fuzzy hair o' yourn as a warnin' of the evil that's in you; then it might do you some good. Sally Baxter set me against curls" (with a pious shudder). "Always makin' believe, she was, that she tried to stroke 'em down and couldn't." Even then Martha took heart of grace and felt very thankful for the hint given her that perhaps her unruly curls were like pretty Sally Baxter's, and felt very sorry for poor grandma, who never could have been anything more than a very neat girl, she thought.

At the present moment Martha had good reason for getting through her work as quickly as her grandmother could wish. She scrubbed away with a devotion that put even her grand-

mother at ease as to the floor being done as well as it could be by anybody but herself, and so allowing her to turn her attention to other sinners.

“Marthy, that Dr. Perry’s a fool, if ever there was one.”

“Why, grandma! Everybody speaks real well of him, and thinks he’s going to be most as good as Dr. Johnson.”

“O’ course; ’cos he’s new. But I s’pose I know a fool when I see him;” and she snuffed the air as if she might perhaps recognize the approach of one.

“Such foolishness to think that one kind of air’s any better than another! Just as if Seth Gardner could n’t live in Portsea’s well’s anywhere else.”

“Why, grandma, what’s the matter with Seth? His asthma is n’t any worse, is it?”

“Well, not as I knows on. I hev thought his pipes seemed a trifle wheezier a while back; but, land! ashmy’s as safe a thing as he could hev. I wonder what he’d say to my rheumatiz; but some folks never is satisfied, noway. He’s managed to breathe in Portsea so fur, and now

comes your young doctor, and says he must hev some different kind o' air."

"But where's he going to get it?" Martha asked.

"Why, where were you, child, when the doctor was tellin' your pa last night? Prancin' round down at the gate, I s'pose. Well, the doctor's got some silly notion that salt air ain't the best for him, — jest as if he'd been born in Portsea if it was n't the Lord's will; I call it downright onreligious. However, he's put it into their heads, and they're all agog to go and stay with Seth's brother out West."

"When was all this settled?" Martha asked, sitting back on her heels, with her hands resting on the edge of her pail, as if that were the only fixed fact she had to cling to. "Why" (with a puzzled look), "it was only yesterday morning I was helping Abby with her pickles, and she was calculating just how many jars she should want, and she never said a word about this."

"'T aint many pickles Seth Gardner'll want in this world, if they're goin' junketin' round. And there's your pa ain't got no more sense 'n any other man. He'd order 'em a bulloon

an' a pair o' wild horses to take 'em anywheres they liked. He says, 'Oh, go right along, an' we'll take care o' little Patty:' the poor child might be ragged and hungry for all he'd ever know. There, Marthy Symmes, don't set there askin' questions an' let the work hang round all day."

Poor Martha, who had remained speechless, hoping that out of her grandmother's indignation some explanation might come, wrung out her cloth with an energy which might have suggested the idea that she would like to have expended some of it on the old lady herself.

"Dear little Patty! at least we shall have her for comfort," she said, but very softly; for of all offences one of the greatest was to be cheerful when Grandma Parker was low in her mind. But at that moment came a little voice from outside; beginning apparently on the road, before there could be a chance for an answer; continuing along the path and up the steps, in a cheerful, busy stream.

"I'm a coming to tea, grandma, and I'll help you wash the dishes, Aunt Martha, and mum's coming pretty soon, when pa's had his dreadful-

tasting stuff ; and I can have some sponge-cake if I don't ask too many questions, and you must n't let me get into any mischief, Aunt Martha, cause mum says I'm a new pin."

The ripple stopped in the doorway, and there stood a little maid, tidy as mother's hands could make her, in calico dress, tire, and sun-bonnet of the freshest and sweetest ; over her arm an atom of a red plaid shawl, because she was "going to stay and go home with mum in the moonshining." It was very evident there was one being who would have no sharp words from grandma, however bad her "rheumatics" might be. As the old woman stroked down her apron to receive her little darling, it almost seemed as if some of the infinity of wrinkles were smoothed from her forehead, and the quavering old voice had a touch of sweetness in its welcoming tone.

"Come right along to granny, my duck, and see what she's got way down in her pocket waitin' for you."

Patty came tip-toeing over the floor, but stopping on the way for a hug to Aunt Martha.

"Mother coming pretty soon?" her aunt said ; and how's father to day?"

Patty shook her head. "He's got one of his worstest turns, an' he's been breathing like coming up hill all day, an' mum's been crying."

"Welly, well," grandma said, "I'm glad you come away to see somebody chipper. You need n't stan' in the middle of the floor, Marthy, an' look as if you was goin' to wheese for company to Seth. You get the child some'n good right away. Some crullers 'll do till tea-time."

No, Patty had had orders and would accept of no consolation in the way of eatables till the tea-table was set, except some peppermints out of grandma's pocket, which were as much a part of the old lady's being as her knitting.

Martha went away to dress herself and make her preparations for tea; feeling as if, perhaps, the fear that father might not come home punctually, or that Reuben might not be at the gate at the appointed time, or even that the frightful apparition of Lucy Jane Carter in the distance did not represent the worst of misfortunes. Still, as she put a final pink bow on her collar, and stood with her head a little on one side, in doubt if blue might not possibly be more effective, she thought that anything which prevented

her sitting in the choir by Reuben that night would be a great disappointment. An aching tooth is not a broken leg, but for all that, it represents much more than we are likely to bear patiently.

Martha was washing up the tea things when her sister Abby came in to keep grandma company till her early bed hour, and then give little Patty the treat of going home "as late as if she was great growed-up folks." Mrs. Gardner's face showed even more than the ten years difference between her and her sister. In her youth she had belonged to the delicate New England type, and the pensive outline of her face had been very different from Martha's cheerful prettiness at the same age; but now one could not look at her without thinking that hers must have been a life where work and recreation were very unequally divided. Or, perhaps, that there had been in herself no capacity except for work; no thought that she would work all the better for amusing herself once in a while. Whatever might be the trials of Martha's life, her feeling as if happiness were the most natural thing to come to her, would help

her to catch at many a chance that Abby had lost. The fairy godmother who brings animal spirits as her christening gift will not be easily outwitted by the most spiteful of her clan.

"Oh, Abby!" Martha said, as one washed and the other wiped; "do tell me what Dr. Perry said about Seth; I had n't the first notion that he was any worse."

"I don't know that he's any worse than he's been all summer, — that was bad enough. Dr. Perry came because of a fresh cold Seth had got. There's some way of listening to what's going on inside, and he said Seth was breathing every which way, and must n't have any more of this sea air till he was stronger."

"It's a comfort to think you've got Seth's brother wanting you so out West. It don't seem as if I shall know how to get along without you, but I would n't have you stay here for anything."

"Well, I do feel about discouraged," Abby said, turning to put a pile of saucers on the shelf, and taking the chance to wipe her eyes on a corner of the towel before she began upon the cups. "Seth is n't fit for work, and there never

was a man hated so to be fed with a spoon as he does."

"Well, when it's your own folks, and they don't like anything better than feeding you with a spoon, I should n't think he'd mind. Why, father'll think that extra crop of hay was just sent to pay Seth's doctor's bill. I'm sure I lot on Patty's company this winter."

"You're ever so good, Martha; I'm sure I'm glad now there's no more to leave, — except up by the church. You'll be sure to see to the rose bushes this spring."

"There, there, Abby," Martha said, desperately; "I can't bear my trouble now and next spring, too. Seth'll be better, and you'll be back, and we shall be just as happy as we can be. Why, you act just as if going out West was going to hurt him instead of cure him."

"Well, I'll try to think so. Seth's glad to make the change, and he says it'll be a rest for me. It does n't seem as if I ever could rest easy without Patty right by me, but she'll be happy, the darling. And you really don't mind the trouble, dear, do you? She half lives here now; she won't fret grandma, will she?"

Martha was eloquent on the certainty that grandma might always be counted on where Patty was concerned. She talked of all that she should do for Patty, then changed the subject to making, and turning, and preparing clothes for the winter, till Abby forgot her present sorrow in the effort of intellect required for turning all hers and Patty's wardrobe upside down and inside out, to the great improvement of the whole. It was the happy period when skirts were not gored, and a grease spot might be placed in honorable retirement among gathers or under a hem. Martha listened with unselfish devotion, but with the corner of her eye on the clock, hoping that the cut of her sister's cloak might be decided on before the hour had reached seven.

CHAPTER II.

THE WALK HOME.

Patience a little; learn to wait;
Hours are long on the clock of Fate.

As the clock struck, Patty came running in to say that Mr. Reuben was at the gate all dressed up to sing hymns. To any one with an eye for the picturesque Reuben Wilson might have been a more attractive figure in his usual working-dress of corduroy and cap than to-night in Sunday suit and stiff straw-hat; but Martha, as she came down the walk, thought she had never seen Reuben look so—well, so like what she imagined a man should be,—strong and masterful and good beside; that combination of tender, kind eyes, with broad shoulders, which go to a woman's heart more than the most regular of profiles. Reuben was swinging Patty gently back and forth on the gate, while she chattered back to him.

"Patty says she's going to sit in the singing-seats with me when she's a big girl."

"Yes, I'm a-going to sing, 'My Days is Grass.' That's the beautifulest of all."

"'Boylston,'" Aunt Martha said; "that's Patty's favorite; we sing it together nicely."

"Yes; that's mum's putting-to-bed song. When she don't have time to sing it more than free times over, then I keep on all by myself till I go to sleep; so I know it real well."

Martha looked a little sad as she thought how soon "mum's putting-to-bed song" would have to be sung by some one else. But Reuben said, "Patty, you can't sit in the seats till you can look over the top of the curtain when you stand up."

"Fiddle-de-dee," Patty said. "They don't want to see me; all they've got to do's to listen."

Reuben looked at Martha and laughed, saying, "I think I'd rather look at the wonderful flowers on 'Lecta White's bonnet than hear her voice. I wonder who's ever going to be brave enough to tell the poor old body she's come to the end of her singing days."

Patty said, scornfully, "O' course I should n't squeak like Miss 'Lecta. I'm going to sing real pretty, just as Aunt Martha does. When she's sewing she makes her voice sound all soft and trembly. I can't hear her so well in church, 'cause your voice gets right in front of hers."

Aunt Martha shook her head. "It is n't pretty to speak so about an old lady, Patty. Miss 'Lecta's very kind to you, and she always gives you goodies out of her pocket."

Patty looked penitent. "No, I won't never laugh no more; only she did n't give me any goodies for a week."

"How do you know my voice from anybody else's?" Reuben asked. "You can't tell 'way down in the church—such a little mouse as you are."

"Mouses can stand up on a cricket," Patty answered, triumphantly. "I look for the pink bow on Aunt Martha's bonnet, and there you are reading out of her book. I 'member all the tunes, too, 'cause she sings them at home all the time."

Reuben laughed, — all the more because the pretty pink color came into Martha's cheeks as

she told Patty she must run in and help take care of grandma, for it was time to start for the church.

"She's a funny little soul," Reuben said, as they walked away.

"Yes, I'm so fond of her, it'll be hard work to do any scolding when I have the care of her. Did you know Seth's so bad with the asthma that the doctor says he must go out West? Of course, Abby's got to go, too, and Patty'll come here. Abby's real downhearted about it."

"I don't wonder. Seth's been looking like a sick man for a good while. I suppose the winter'd come hard on him."

"Yes, he can't teach when he has these bad spells, and I believe that's worse on him than the asthma. So they'll shut up the house and go off to Ohio—till spring, anyway."

"Well, I dare say Seth'll pick up again; and I've heard a teacher from here's thought a deal of out there. More than likely he'll find a school wanting him. He's got his folks there, so he'd be contented to settle down; but how'd Abby like it?"

Martha winced from the dread she had tried not to think about. "I suppose Abby would n't mind where she was if she'd got Seth and Patty with her. That's the worst of married folks. You can't seem to help them only when they're in trouble; as soon as they're happy they don't need anybody else."

Reuben pulled a twig from the willow-tree they were passing, and tried to look quite unconcerned, as he bit off the end, and said, "Well, I'm sure it shows they love one another anyway, and that's what they marry for. You would n't want Abby to hanker after you so she could n't be contented with her husband? Maybe you'll find you would be contented away from Portsea with somebody else."

Martha thought that Reuben was not making himself quite so agreeable as usual. There was a certain Hosea Martin, who had just returned from California with the reputation of quite an indefinite number of thousands acquired there,—some foolish imaginations had gone as high as ten, and even twenty thousand; they might have said fifty, as far as Martha was concerned. But the owner of this wealth had been most unnecessarily

attentive to her at a sewing-circle the week before ; had even stepped in front of Reuben, as Martha thought he was going to walk home with her. It had ended in her having to make-believe listen to this stupid Hosea telling her how much everybody thought of him out in California, while she was trying to catch scraps of what was going on between Reuben and Lucy Jane Carter, following on behind. And it was a rainy night, too, and she had been thinking how nice it would be to walk home with Reuben under his umbrella. If it was the chance of Hosea Martin's asking her to go back to California with him, she would put that idea out of his head very soon. So she answered in a decided way, though she was quite blushing under her cape-bonnet at the necessity of speaking about herself :—

“It's lucky for Abby that she has n't got to ask leave to go ; she'd find grandma thought she came before all the husbands in the world. I guess it wouldn't be any good my asking to be happy anywhere out of Portsea.”

Reuben did not look as cheered up as she had expected ; indeed, his face was quite blank as he

said, "But your grandmother doesn't expect you to stay at home and take care of her all your days, does she? I should think you'd done your share of that."

"I don't know as anybody ever does get through with doing their duty," Martha said, with a sigh, heaved to the thought of how often it had been done to Grandma Parker under difficulties. "Grandma took care of Abby and me, after mother died, as long as she could move round, and I don't think it's any more than right we should do for her now. Abby can't, of course; but I don't suppose I shall ever go so far away from Portsea but what I could look after her — a good deal, that is."

Martha put in that final clause because Reuben looked so sober and thoughtful, almost as if he were puzzling something out in his mind. She did not think he could be pleading Hosea Martin's cause (even supposing the obnoxious Hosea required an advocate, which she did not believe), for they were not friends; but the bare possibility made her face sober, too; so they walked on with but few words till they reached the church. Those few on both sides

did not sound at all as if they came out of their thoughts. And as they came in sight of the porch, there, on the steps, sat Lucy Jane, with the air of being a fixture, while a group of companions stood in the doorway behind. Martha's usual placidity fairly bristled. What did the girl mean by sitting there, as if she wanted to catch Reuben? She should think she would be too ashamed to live.

But Lucy Jane's high, lively voice sounded neither ashamed nor suffering when she called out, as soon as they were within hearing, "Just see what I've done, Martha; twisted my foot so's I don't see how I'm ever to get up those horrid old stairs." Some one behind whispered, "Wide enough for Reuben to help you up;" and Lucy responded aloud, "Go 'long with you. I don't believe you care a bit whether I've hurt myself or not. Just you all go up-stairs and let me be; I daresay I can get my boot off after awhile if I try."

She put a teary tone into her voice, leaning her head against the side of the porch with quite a suffering air, so that Martha stepped forward with ready compassion, and said, "I'm so sorry;

do let me try ; I can unlace your boot a great deal better than you can," and was down on her knees in a moment. But the first gentle touch produced such an "Ow !" and a squirm that she desisted.

One of the girls giggled and said, "Lor, Martha, you're no good. Better let Reuben try ; he knows how to unlace a boot real well ; you come up-stairs with us." Lucy Jane responded more tearfully and with still more dignity :—

"Well, I think you need n't speak so unfeeling. I wish you'd all go away ; I suppose I can sit here till you come down, and then maybe somebody'd help me home. If I had a knife so's I could cut the lacing maybe I could rub my foot some, and then I could get home alone."

This was said so pitifully that Reuben's knife appeared instantly, and he took Martha's place in front of the injured member, somewhat embarrassed as he tried to insert the knife between the lacings. Lucy Jane exclaimed, in a beatified tone of relief, "Oh, Reuben ! how gently you do touch ; you don't seem to more'n take the tips of your fingers, and I thought everybody else'd yank the life out of me."

The most unbelieving of the girls was obliged to suppress her giggles in her handkerchief, and the others began to move towards the stairs, one saying, "I guess we need n't wait any longer; you'll feel better after you've had that boot off and on again a few times. I would n't wait if I was you, Martha; it'll take quite a while. Mr. White's been a-scraping his old fiddle-bow till I guess he'll use it on us if we don't hurry up."

Martha lingered, half believing in Lucy Jane's sufferings, half thinking that she could not want to be left alone there with Reuben on his knees before her. But Lucy Jane was of a very different opinion, and in the intervals of her sighs of relief over the progress of the unlacing, said, "Oh yes, Martha, run along; I would n't keep you for anything. I guess I shall be able to crawl up after awhile. I won't keep you long either, Reuben, only just till I can stand, — you are so good." So Martha disappeared up the stairs, and took her accustomed place in the singing seats. But the choir, the church, life generally, had a very different aspect from the glowing haze, half sunset, half moonrise, through which she had walked to

meet this disappointment. One of the old members of the church was to be buried the next day between meetings, and in addition to the usual hymns to be practised for the morning services, were those to be sung at the funeral. It all seemed so appropriate to poor Martha's present mood; so different from her usual cheeriness. The thought in her mind, as she sang the words of the wailing old hymn tune, which would be heard to-morrow as they stood around the open grave, was not of the calm, wrinkled face she had seen in the corner of that pew over by the window every Sunday as long as she could remember. No: it was of something the old woman had once said to her, and of the train of possibilities it suggested.

It was when Martha had first taken her place in the choir, and one day after church Mrs. Lane had patted her on the shoulder, and said, "I love to hear you young things singing up there; it makes me think of the days when the rest on us was young, too. You won't know, nuther, how nice it is till you get somebody to sing 'long o' you out o' the same book. 'Siah and me, we sang every Sunday till he said we'd

better keep on week days, 'cos there was n't nobody else could keep him in tune, only me."

It was not long since 'Siah had been laid in the grave that would be opened again to-morrow to receive the faithful mourner, who, for the few lonely Sundays left to her in this world, had crept to church to sit in her old place. Martha's voice almost broke down as she thought how the hymn-book, over which she had seen her old friend's head bowed, must have been blistered with tears. Had 'Siah ever disappointed his "Lyddy," as the old man always proudly called her? Ever made her sit striving to catch the sound of a step on the creaking stairs? It was growing late. When she sat down she could see the glow from the evening sky through the great square windows; now the moonlight was lying across the church. Very soon the last groan of the bombadoon would give the sign for a general scraping and skurry of feet, and her last chance for that happy walk home would have gone; and at that moment came the click of the door behind her. She had fully determined that whatever she might hear she would not turn her head to look; but when the

sound came she could not, for the life of her, sit with her eyes fixed on her book. There were Reuben and Lucy Jane slipping into the end of the seat. Was it the flare of the lamp in the draught, or did she really detect on Reuben's face a comical lifting of his eyebrows, which might mean that he had come at last to the end of a tedious probation? Fancy or not, for some reason heart and voice came back, and for the next half-hour no one joined more clearly in the singing than she. And her reward was that as they trooped slowly out of the gallery Reuben made his way towards her, and whispered, "Manage to wait in the entry, under the stairs, and we can walk home along the beach; do, I'll be there in a minute." It was a most appealing, persuasive "do"; and nothing should interfere with that walk. Indeed, poor Lucy Jane would have had to expend an ankle-bone instead of a boot-lacing to have had any effect on Reuben now; and before the giggling, chattering crowd had decided who was to walk home with whom, Martha and her companion had slipped away and taken the road to the beach.

The tide was nearly full, and as they stood

upon the strip of shining sand the broad silver pathway began at their very feet, and no sound rose above the low ocean swell but the long swish, as a single wave curled and broke into a white line of foam along the beach. Reuben had taken Martha's hand to lead her over some rough spot, and still held it, as they strolled on, silently, — for what more did Martha want just then, except, perhaps, to know that Reuben was as well content as she. Presently he said, looking across the water, "It's so quiet to-night that the wake of the moon looks as solid as a bridge, as if we could walk straight across to the other side, away from everybody — just you and I, Martha." If the last words needed an answer they had it in the tightening clasp which Martha's hand gave almost involuntarily. She thought that, perhaps, he was going to tell her that times being hard and carpenters not wanted just then in Portsea, he would do as he had done before, and go off with the fishing fleet to the banks ; or perhaps farther still, as a sailor across the water, for Reuben had others dependent on him, and had made home comfortable for his mother and the younger ones ever since he had

been old enough to work. It was disappointing, just as she felt that they were to have such a happy walk ; but she would not have Reuben do anything but what he thought was right ; so she would help him to tell her, and then she could the sooner begin to comfort him, and herself, too.

" Yes, I wish there was a bridge, and not that dreadful long voyage to where you went before. I was wondering to-night, Reuben, if you would ever have to go off there again, when the moonlight in the aisles made me think of what you told me about the old church in England."

" You were very good to be thinking about me at all. I tell you I felt mean when I had to let you go up-stairs all alone ; but you saw just how it was, didn't you ?" Martha nodded. She had made up her mind not to care for any explanation, but it was very pleasant to think that he recognized her right to care. Again they walked on in silence for a few moments, till Reuben gave a long sigh, and said : " It's farther away than over the bridge, this time, if I have to go at all. I don't know as you can help me, Martha,"— how her heart fell from its happy

height,—"but I wanted to tell you how things were. I've had a great chance given me; such a chance as I don't suppose comes to a man twice; but it means an awful deal. Would you mind my telling you, and giving me a bit of advice? I've been thinking till I'm all in a muddle, and maybe it would sound different if I talked it out to you. If you could only tell me it wasn't my bounden duty to do what seems like jumping overboard."

Martha almost gasped, "Oh, Reuben, I don't know as I ought to give advice about anything serious. You know what's right always;" then very low, "don't ask me to tell you you ought to go away."

"If it's a real ought, I suppose it would be worse still to be ashamed of myself for letting it alone, even if I leave everything I want behind." He threw out his strong right hand, with clenched fist, and made a stride forward, "Why, Martha, dear," he said tenderly, "I'm acting as if all I'd got to do was to make you run after me; how I wish it was! But I'll tell you how the land lies. When father died there was just money enough left to give me a trade; so

mother she said, 'Take it, and I guess I can make money enough with my wash-tub and my thimble to keep you all till such time as you can help.' Well, we've got along first-rate. The children have had their schooling, and poor Ben's broken back has had all the doctoring we could get at; but now it does seem as if somebody'd got to turn out and make room. I've been thinking lately that now John's got his trade learned he could do all I do, and Portsea's such a little place there don't seem work enough for two of us. And just as I was turning this round in my head, and wondering if we could n't spread out somewhere else, comes Hosea Martin, and says, 'Go back with me to California, and you'll make your fortune, sure.' It's a new place with lots of houses to build, and big pay; and it's tempting to think that I might make money enough to let mother sit down and have one good long rest before she dies. And there's one thing more: folks have been telling me lately that over in the city there's the greatest doctor in this part of the world for backs like Ben's. Since that, it seems to me every time he has a bad turn as if it's my fault; for it would

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take a heap of money, and there's nobody to make it but me. Now, Martha, what do you say? Tell me what I ought to do, and I'll do it, if it takes the heart out of me."

He stopped short, and stood looking at Martha; she said nothing, but looked across the wide moonlit waters, and waited for strength to answer. It had come in a flash; but she knew then, and never doubted afterward, what it was her duty to do.

"It seems most too dreadful to say go; but it would be worse to have you do anything but what's right."

"I've got my answer, then," he said, "from you and mother, too. I hated to tell her; but I thought she might feel kind of hurt if I did n't ask her to help decide. And do you know, I found she'd heard about the city doctor, too; and there she'd been lying awake, and I, too, wondering how the money could be got; neither of us dared to speak to the other."

If Martha had had a hope that the mother's courage would be wanting, it was gone now. "You are sure of Hosea?"

"Sure that he's honest. He's a good deal

of a blower about himself and always was, but he's got facts to prove what he says. I know he's put money into Lawyer Burnham's hands to invest for him, and there was enough over to buy a pretty snug home for the old people. Folks don't generally own up to the best or the worst in their money matters ; but I know I should feel well paid if I had as much as he's got to show for the last half dozen years."

Six years without seeing Reuben ! They stretched out as indefinitely as that wake over the water, which seemed to pass into a dark cavern beyond. When Reuben had asked his momentous question they had stopped in their walk ; and there they stood, he wishing that she would speak ; but the light shone on her face, so that he could see with what difficulty she controlled the trembling of her lips. They had been too engrossed with themselves to have much consciousness of anything about them ; but at that moment Reuben was aware of a prolonged roar, which might have come from any stray member of a menagerie, but that it took the form of his own name, and glancing back along the beach, he saw a long, gesticulating

figure bearing down upon them. It was of no use to turn and walk out of reach of those strides, so he stood his ground, thinking that their unwelcome friend might hail them and pass on ; but without much hope when he saw who it was.

“ Well, I never should ’a caught up with you two if you had n’t stopped. I ’ve ben a yellin’ ever since I turned down onto the beach. Warm, for fall weather, ain’t it ? ”

He stood bareheaded, wiping his forehead ; the breath coming from his long throat might have turned a windmill. A begrudging “ warm enough ” was the only answer ; so after a few final puffs he began again : —

“ Putty full moon that is— dunno as I ever seen none any fuller.”

No response ; and as he had improvidently exhausted the topic of the moon at the outset, there was nothing to do but find another. A sideway glance at the silent faces of the others seemed to inspire him, and he began with a chuckle : “ Guess, Miss Marthy, you left a pretty hoppin’ mad young woman when you cut off round the corner. Lucy Jane Carter, she was

a countin' on hangin' on to somebody goin' home. How the gals did laff when they see you two. But I said, says I, 'Lor, Marthy, she likes a walk long o' me's well's anybody.' I'll just foller on an' give Reuben a chance to go'n ask after that boot-lacin' he cut up so."

The laugh which followed this covered Reuben's whisper to Martha, "He'll hold on to the last, so there's nothing to do but turn back and go home." So absolutely hopeless a state seemed to restore Reuben's equilibrium, and throwing a pebble into the water with superfluous energy, his wrath went with it. As they turned he caught at Martha's hand under her shawl; she did not try to withdraw it, for "there could not be any harm in that little bit of comfort," she said to herself.

"You did yourself credit in that last hymn, Abram," Reuben said. Abram wriggled and simpered from knees to the corners of his capacious mouth.

"Wull, I think our end of the bench doos come out strong when it tries. Fact is, there's some'n or 'nother 'bout Mirandy Green's voice that sets me out. When she fetches one o'

them yells o' her'n on Hal, and kind o' tinkles down on to 'lujah, then I just tackle to. I don't believe nobody kin get more out o' them low notes than I do when I go at 'em. I was a think-in', too, of Mis' Lane, 'n it seemed kind o' respectful to shout's loud's we could to show how we liked to sing the hymns she was partial to. She allers set a heap by the singin'. I declare I never missed nothin' more than that kind o' smilin' look she used to give up at the singin'-seats when she was pleased. There has n't ben no more smiles since she's had to set alone in the pew."

Martha said it seemed as if Mrs. Lane was one of the people you could never get over missing, and was glad of an excuse for wiping away the tears which were running down her cheeks at the thought of choir practisings to come, and of what would seem to her like funeral hymns over dead and gone happy evenings. "Reuben gone for years and years"—what tune would be dreary enough to set to those words? Feeling rather than seeing that she must have a little time to quiet herself, Reuben tried to turn the flow of Abram's talk into a safe

channel, and asked about the sale of some land near by. Abram accepted the topic most readily; and had so much to say about crops and cattle, his own affairs and those of his neighbor's, that Reuben and Martha thought they were at least to be left to enjoy each other's silent presence, when Abram stopped quite suddenly, and turned into quite another track.

"So, as I was a sayin', I told 'em up to the Corner, t' I should as soon think o' sellin' them white oxen as ef they was my twin brothers, when in comes Ben Alden, 'n was all agog about this new rig o' your'n, about goin' to Californy 'long o' Hosee Martin. All the boys said they should as soon a' thought o' Hosee's takin' the meetin'-house 'long with him as you, an' I said, sez I, I'll ask him, fust thing."

"Yes, and you have asked me," Reuben said, sharply, "and you can tell the boys that I'll be sure to send word up to the Corner just what I'm going to do, and when I mean to do it. They can talk about somebody else's business till they hear from me."

"Wull, I'm sure you're 'commodatin'," the good, dull fellow answered, "and I'll tell 'em ;

but they 've got to talk about some 'n, 'n they all think a heap o' you. Everybody wants to get to Californy now-a-days wuss 'n they do to heaven ; but Hosee, he says, you 're the one to get ahead, 'n he can show you how to make a fort'n, sure. We shall miss you, though, — shan't we, Marthy? Not so bad as somebody else. Say, Reuben, it was mean o' you to go takin' off that boot in such a killin' way, 'n then let her cry her eyes out for ye."

Reuben drew the cold, trembling hand he held up to his arm, and covered it with his, as he said in his kindest way, "I shall be ever so much obliged to you, Abram, if you 'll just hush up the stories for a while. If I can find a way to make money for mother and the youngsters, I'm bound to do it ; but it's Hosea's business, as well as mine, and he would n't want it talked about. Perhaps it would upset everything if they got asking him questions up at the Corner. So you be a good fellow, and bluff 'em off, wont you ?"

Abram declared his readiness to take the most severe measures to silence all conversation whatever at the Corner, — the Corner, as central

grocery and post-office, being the Portsea Club, free to all. Yet it had a certain silent power, too, of its own, which made it difficult for an unpopular pair of boots to find a resting-place on the top of its large stove. Abram's bewailings over the loss his friend would be to the town were too hearty and sympathetic to be a safe subject of conversation at this moment, and thankful enough was poor Martha to reach her own gate, and end this wished-for evening.

Perhaps Martha would not have been able to dispose of her troublesome friend with quite such a summary good evening, if Reuben had not been as glad as she to end the discordant trio. Abram was not proof against the compliment of having his opinion asked by such an authority as the chosen companion of Hosea Martin, — just now the great man of Portsea, — and before he quite knew that he had been dismissed, Reuben was walking him down the road in earnest consultation on some abstruse question of potato planting.

"Seems to me your manners kind o' giv' out, Martha," her father said, as he stood waiting at the door for her. "Could n't you have

asked 'em in to sit awhile ; it's only just after nine."

"Dear me, father," Martha said, wearily, "I guess you'd think it was midnight if you'd been walking with Abram Potter."

"Dare say I should, 'cause he is n't courtin' me. I will say I think a pretty gal's the ungratefulest critter goin'. I should ha' liked to speak to Reuben, though. I suppose he did n't say nothin' about this plan of Californy, did he?"

"Yes, he and Abram talked about it a little. I think he does n't like to say much till it's settled."

"Well, he's a lucky fellow. I wish I'd had such a chance when I was young, I'd a' been a rich man now. But I s'pose it'll be many a year before we see him back. There, go 'long to bed, — you look kind o' slim. I hope you ain't took cold."

Martha put down the lamp on the bureau in her own room. Would not the little square of glass above it reflect some change in the face of the girl who a few hours before had stood there thinking that no power except that of Lucy Jane

Carter's attractions could come between her and Reuben? She stood dreamily gazing into the glass, as if she were seeing there a picture of what looked now like such a dreary solitude,—winters and summers of doing her duty, so well to look back upon, so toilsome to anticipate,—when just as the scene was shut out by a mist, threatening in another moment to fall in a shower, there came from the next room a querulous call—duty's voice. And the tears were brushed away, and Martha stood by her grandmother's bed, trying to answer in a suspiciously cheerful tone.

Grandma Parker in bed presented the effect of looking through a hole in a nightcap, rather than of a face surrounded by ruffles of an ornamental kind. Deprived of the accessories of frisette and teeth, there seemed very little of the old lady left; but that little was wide awake and prepared to be amused.

"What's the news, Marthy? Can't you lop down on the side of the bed and tell me su'n cheerful. I've got the creeps most awful."

Now "the creeps" was an invention of the enemy, to which grandma held herself to own

the exclusive patent. The reverence due to her age was as nothing compared to the devotion she exacted while the attack was upon her. When her grandmother impressed upon her that no exertion was too much for her to make as long as she was spared from experiencing such suffering, Martha thought that perhaps if the choice were given her, she should prefer to be the victim rather than the nurse. However, she knew what was expected of her, and not till the lights were out an hour hence could any more thought be given to her own sorrows. "So glad I had n't got to crying," she thought, poor girl, as she went to work to rub and soothe and amuse. Grandma had to be shaken up, and started again on an entirely new system of bed before Martha sat down to begin the process of rubbing she so dreaded. It was so difficult to remember the places requiring particular attention, and those which must be skipped lightly over, under pain of being treated as if she were personally responsible for all her grandmother's sufferings.

"Seein's you've ben a' junketin' all the evenin', seems if you might find su'n to amuse yer poor old grandma with."

As the junketing had consisted of singing funeral hymns, and receiving a grievous disappointment, Martha could not at once think of any entertaining trifle to begin upon. However, grandma enjoyed funeral details, so she said, "Mrs. Lane's going to be buried to-morrow."

"Why, so she be! She seemed a heap spryer than me the last time I see her; but Scriptur words is true, — one's took and t' other's left. Sat right on the bench, front o' me at school, she did, she and Sally Baxter, — gigglin' things they was, as ever I see. But she was a good livin' woman, I must say. Did you hear who was to have her things? Is there to be a vendoo, or was they left by will?"

"I heard some one say she'd given what belonged to her to her nieces. Mr. Lane's brother is residuary legatee."

"Sidiwary grab-all, they might as well say; that's what it comes to. I ain't goin' to have no such actions when I die; you'n Abby's got to share'n share alike. There was my aunt Baxter. She was what-d'ye-call-'em when Grandpa Slater died, 'n she would n't give away not so much as the makin' of a kettle-holder out o' his

old pants. I s'pose that was where Sallie got her way o' havin' the best of everythin'; the best seat at sleigh rides, and everybody else's beaux. She'd have you think 't was 'cos they was all after her. P'raps it was; seems hard, though, that pretty looks should go for so much more 'n doin' right. I never could see through it."

"I wonder," Martha began, and stopped so long that her grandmother said, but not unamiably—Martha's gentle touch had so stroked away the day's sharpness,—" 'T ain't good to go to bed with your mind unsettled. What you got on it now?"

"I was only wondering whether things that happened when you were young seem very different now, you're away off from them. Does it seem so very much matter whether they went right or wrong?"

The old woman's eyes looked off towards the candle. Her lips moved as if she were speaking to figures which had come back out of the past, to remind her of days when the capability was in her to suffer as keenly as the girl who now sat beside her with patient face but troubled heart.

"You're lookin' forrard, and I'm a-lookin' backard, an' 't ain't likely but what the light falls different; but I can't say but there's things that stands out just as sharp, an' hurt just as much as they ever did. No, Marthy, 't ain't no use saying it 'll all be the same a hundred years hence. You make the best of it, or the wust of it, just as you kin, but there's some things you 'll go a-wantin' all your days if so be's they can't be your'n. I can't help thinkin' I might 'aben a better-natured woman all my days if it had n't ben for Sally Baxter's curls an' her pink cheeks. She was a deal puttier 'n me, I know; but I was dreadful fond of Charlie Bruce, 'n who knows ——"

Martha could scarcely believe her eyes, as a corner of the sheet was raised to wipe away a tear that trickled down the old face. Grandma never was much of a hand for kissing; so Martha thought, as she stood looking down at her, and wished she could venture to show how sorry she was, — sorry for the poor plain girl, whose love had been no match for Sally Baxter's prettiness, — when she felt herself drawn down, and the unaccustomed kiss given by grandma herself.

“There, Martha, I won’t keep you up no longer. You’ve done me a sight of good. ’Tain’t the rubbin’ only, but it’s comfortin’ to have you look as if you cared, though it’s all so long ago. I dunno as I was one that folks ever did seem to care much about; p’raps it was my fault. It’s kind o’ queer, though, your askin’ me that to-night about lookin’ back. Su’n’ or ’nother had set me to thinkin’—mebbe it was the way the moon was shinin’ in—about the night I made sure it was Sally, an’ not me, he cared for. I was thinkin’ that I’d rather be lyin’ here, rheumatiz an’ all, sooner’n go back to that night—all o’ sixty years ago, it was. Good night, Martha dear; I’m kind o’ sorry for you young folks that’s in the thick of it.”

To be called “dear” by grandma, and to think of her as grieving over an old love story, were both ideas sufficiently out of the common to distract Martha from her own griefs. Here had been a sorrow greater than her own; for Reuben did love her. She thought she might feel sure of that, even if he should think it best not to say it in plain words before he went. Six years—that seemed such a little while compared to

sixty, and with happiness to hope for at the end of it. So Martha fell asleep without the "good cry" she thought would be her only relief, and with pity to spare for some one beside herself.

CHAPTER III.

GOOD-BY TO FRIEND AND LOVER.

When shall we meet again, dearest and best,
Thou going eastward, I going West?
Thou in whose love my heart searcheth for rest,
When shall we meet again, dearest and best?

THE waking in the chilly dawn next morning was despondent enough; but by the time the daylight overpowered the candle by which she dressed, Martha began to feel—at first vaguely hopeful, then quite sure, that nothing could be so dreadful as it seemed last night. Reuben would not go for at least two months, and in that time how much might be done and said. He would be sure to see her often, and she would be careful not to distress him and destroy the pleasure of their being together by dismal looks. But as time went on it seemed as if her good resolutions were wasted, so far as Reuben was concerned. The only thing for which she had not planned came to pass. Reu-

ben appeared to avoid her,—at least made no effort that they should talk apart,—and she almost fancied that he feared to be alone with her. At first, much as Martha loved her sister, she half begrudged the time spent in helping her with the preparations for moving, thinking it was that which kept her from meeting Reuben ; but as she saw more plainly that he might have come but would not, she was only thankful to do double tasks in her own work and Abby's, if only she could forget sometimes to watch, and listen, and hope. In another week sister and friend would both have gone, and Martha be left to the life which looked so blank in prospect.

The very last afternoon Martha walked over to her sister's house to see if she could be of use either to help or cheer, if that were possible. She knew very well that it would be Abby's way to extract every drop of bitterness the parting could give, from the raking out of the ashes in her old home to the turning the key in the door for the last time. Martha's sense of self-preservation would have made her, had she been in her sister's place, insist on the prospect

of Seth's finding health and happiness in the new home ; but Abby must take her own time for comfort. Meanwhile, Martha could at least cry with her for company. The house looked desolate enough in that dreary process of moving, which makes one wonder whether even a delightful change is worth passing through such a dreary time to reach. Most of the furniture had been sold or given away, but a few things were left waiting to find an asylum at the homestead, and stood looking as lonely as if even cherry wood and brass knobs could feel, the old clock grimly ticking, now that Patty was no longer there to make her little tunes keep time to it ; the secretary given into Martha's special charge, because it held, as she knew, her brother-in-law's most precious possessions, after his wife and child, — pretty little fanciful poems which had found their way into his brain in the midst of correcting long, jagged sums in arithmetic ; more ambitious beginnings of what he fondly hoped might one day see the light in some magazine, — all, indeed, which had made the daily grind of a schoolmaster's life tolerable to poor Seth Gardner. And most tender of all

to Martha, there still stood by the fireside the old settee-cradle. Do they still have them in country places?—the seat with a niche at one end, where baby is tucked in cosily, and at the foot room for mother and her work-basket, where she can darn and jog, and keep peace till the stockings are all mended. All gone for firewood, I dare say, long ago,—as this one would be when the next generation of babies should demand a more modern asylum for their naps. Such a vision came up to Martha's eyes of Abby sitting there, a perfectly happy young mother, with no thought of any harm that could come to baby while she watched over it! Then the little white figure with the first snow-drops on its breast, lying in the sleep whose blessed waking the mother could not share; again the anxious joy and passionate sorrow, till when Patty came, even her happy little presence could not dispel the pall of anxiety which had fallen on the house. With the knowledge of what it was to her sister to leave Patty behind, Martha could not enjoy the prospect of that alleviation. How intolerably dreary it all was, she thought, as she sat down on Patty's little wooden cricket,

and looked into the dull glare of the fire dying out in the stove. Did this dreadful November represent what the rest of her life was going to be? She had always thought of herself as having cheerfulness enough and to spare for the help of other people; and was she going to allow the words which one man might say, or leave unsaid, to change her into a melancholy woman, who could not hear the wind whistle or the waves beat on the beach without crying? But suddenly the tears stopped of themselves; Martha's handkerchief vigorously wiped away the traces, and she tried to bring a little festive look into her face, as she said, "Well, there's one comfort, Abby can't find another Widow Briggs out in Ohio." Voices were heard as Abby returned from a prolonged good-by over the fence to her next neighbor, and with her came a visitor, — a visitation, I might say, — intended, Martha felt, to call her back to the necessity of keeping her fortitude ready for every-day trials.

Widow Briggs was one subject on which the sisters and their grandmother were in absolute sympathy. Indeed, when Martha had offended

by offering an unauthorized remark about the weather or crops, or the color of somebody's hair, grandma could always be appeased by broaching the topic of how "father" was to be defended from the widow. They had their fears to themselves, for Mr. Symmes would say, with a chuckle: "If I can't take care o' myself when Mis' Briggs is round, I ain't worth the savin'. It takes a good while to help her over a mud-puddle; but, landsakes, I don't begrudge givin' a little time to a poor widow woman." Martha really admired her grandmother when the widow stopped in for a visit, and the old lady sat in her rocking-chair, looking like a general on horseback, and prepared to ride down her visitor at the least provocation. But the widow came, knowing that the afternoon would not be one of unmixed social enjoyment, and prepared to make some sacrifice of dignity for the privilege of having Mr. Symmes "see her home." Grandma would probably have interfered with his performance of this last office, if it had not given her such a delightful opportunity for firing some parting shots, such as, "Mind, Zekiel, an' help Mis' Briggs down them steps real kerful. We

ain't so young as we was, be we, Mis' Briggs?" Or, "There, don't stop to put on your coat, Zekiel; what's the use o' coddlin yerself at your age; but wrap up Mis' Briggs well, an' don't keep her out in the doo. There's nothin' like doo for rheumaticks." But in spite of these drawbacks, Widow Briggs appeared periodically in her best dyed silk, and spiral ringlets vibrating on each side of her long cheeks, and here she was now coming up the walk with Abby; happily not in full dress denoting that she meant to be asked to tea if there was an ounce of feasible food left in the house; no, she had on her second best, dingy, red merino gown, sour-red plaid shawl, and a pale red "punkin" hood. This showed that she had "only called in;" but there was a sympathetic whine in the tones of her voice, meaning that she had come as a consoler. This was an additional trial, and Martha instantly prepared to meet her with a determined smile and general air of cheerfulness repelling all comfort.

"Well, Marthy, and how air you? This doos look like a tryin' change. No, thankye, I'll just set right down on this old box. I said to Mrs.

Wilson just now, said I, I must just go an' see those girls, if it's only to say a comfortin' text to 'em, said I. She said you was movin', but I said, if they have n't got a chair to their backs, I'd go all the same."

"The only difficulty seems to be there are no backs to the chairs," Martha said, bringing forward a forlorn wreck, and herself standing in front of the little settee to save it from desecration.

Mrs. Briggs sat down on the backless chair with an air of chief mourner, very exasperating to Martha. On her lap lay her hands muffled in ample blue mittens, and toward the fire stretched a pair of vast india-rubbers, of the shape known only to those who belonged to the prehistoric age of rubber. What can have become of those terrible galoshes with swell-fronted toes and unadjustable heels? No wonder if in our youth we were ready to brave the threatened influenza in becoming shoes rather than leave behind us in the wet, traces as of some strange mammoth creature. A few thousand years hence, when the footprints of one of these shall be found in the strata of the

mud period, and the philosopher of his day attempts to reconstruct the being to which it belonged, how impossible it will be for him to believe in the existence of a girl who wore a number-two shoe!

"No," continued Mrs. Briggs, "I said to Mrs. Wilson, those girls ain't had no experience of life, except just their grandma's ill turns — air they a-goin' to bow to the rod, said I."

Abby had been comparatively cheerful since the worst of her packing and backache was over, and even able to smile at the little jokes with which Martha had tried to help her on; but now she looked so ready to consider herself an object of sympathy that her sister hastened to say, "I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Briggs. I don't think you 've much call to pity Seth and Abby when they 're going to make a pleasant journey, and stay with friends that are just crazy to get them. Seth's ever so much better with only thinking of it."

"Yes," Abby said, "if the getting away does Seth as much good as the talking of it, they won't believe he 's ever been so sick when he gets out to Ohio. He says he 's breathed better

ever since he got away from that little red-hot stove in the school-room. His mother writes word about the pine log fire, and the gum sizzling out, so he thinks he 's never going to have another hard spell after he gets out there. I don't scarcely dare to hope he 'll be so much better, but he won't hear to anything else."

Mrs. Briggs slowly wagged the punkin hood at the fire: "You 're goin' to stay with Seth's folks for a while, ain't you?"

"Yes, we shall go straight to his mother's; but she writes that his sisters are quarrelling who shall have the first visit. It 's real kind in them, when they never saw me."

Mrs. Briggs looked, not volumes, but a whole library, as she said, "Abby, just you mind what I say, an' don't let your folks-in-law put on you. Oh yes, I dare say they 're sweet enough now, but by'm-by, you 'll see."

Abby began with a plaintive remonstrance against this way of classifying Seth's family, but Martha said, emphatically, "I don't see why Abby, or any other woman for the matter of that, should start with thinking that her husband's folks want to tread on her. Seth's

just like a brother to me, and why should n't Abby feel the same about his sisters. I know if I was married I'd make my new folks think all the world of me; I should think it was my fault if they did n't."

Martha hoped that nobody saw the little blush that would steal into her cheeks at her own application of what she had said; but the pun-kin hood only took on an air of wisdom superior to this youthful romance. The bow on top waved considerably, as Mrs. Briggs said, "You're a good girl, Marthy, an' I think you'll come as nigh to pleasing your husband's folks as anybody could — only I guess if there's a hole you won't be left to find it out for yourself. I s'pose my feelings is quick, but the Briggses never did seem to understand me; since I buried poor Mr. Briggs it's a comfort to know there ain't one on 'em dared to say boo nor bah in *my* house."

Martha did not at all begrudge the time given to their uncongenial visitor, since it turned Abby's mind to proving what a delightful home was awaiting her. She herself, poor soul, had often expended all her eloquence on describing

the charms of Ohio, while Abby listened and dropped the tears Martha would so thankfully have shed over the thought of what Portsea and home and grandma were going to be when she was left quite alone. But then she said to herself, "Somebody's got to keep from crying, if we don't all want to mildew, and Abby never could stop when she once began." Abby grew quite cheerful in describing her Ohio relations and their belongings, and Mrs. Briggs listened with the engrossing interest she always took in other people's affairs. Martha busied herself in and out till she heard a few preliminary farewell movements, — not showing, by any means, that the visit was at an end, — only that that blessed conclusion was in the near future.

"Yes," Mrs. Briggs was saying, "I'm glad I come, for I think I've done you good; I never begrudge no time to my friends. I step into Mis Wilson's just 's often 's I can to say a comfortin' word here and there. What with Ben's back, an' Reuben's going away, an' the price of flour, an' one thing an' 'nother, I call her a tried woman. I tell her I don't see how she darst trust Reuben out among them wild

Injuns. She says if there ever was a boy calc'lated to come through a fiery furnace it's Reuben."

"I suppose you know," Martha said, "that he goes to make money, so as to give Ben a better chance of doctoring?"

"So Mis' Wilson says. I tell her I'd sooner take Ben's back as a dispensation than send Reuben out there, where there's a chance to break all the commandments — an' forty-'leven more, if there was any."

"Portsea is n't a big place," Martha said, dryly; "but it's big enough to be wicked in. If I was Reuben's mother I'd trust him as far as a ship could sail away with him." She would have been vexed with herself for giving Mrs. Briggs the chance of knowing where to put a pin prick if anything but the real sorrow had seemed any matter in these dreary days; and so she let the widow find all the satisfaction she might in saying, "Well, I'm sure, Marthy, I'm glad you've got that kind o' motherly feelin' about Reuben. 'Tis n't what all the other girls feel; there's Lucy Jane Carter just cryin' her eyes out, the silly thing. He's worth any girl's

cryin' for, I will say that for him ; but I guess he's had too much to think of to spare time for fallin' in love with Lucy Jane or anybody else."

The widow was fairly under way now, and Martha conveying her to the door, bent on not allowing her eyes to stray to the right or left, lest she should see something to prolong her visit, when on the threshold she paused: "Why, if there ain't Reuben Wilson now! I suppose his mother's sent him over after me, for su'n or 'nother, so I'll go right along."

But Reuben made it very clear that he had come on a quite independent errand, and with a meaning glance at Martha saw that the gate was fairly closed on her visitor's lengthy farewell before he came back. He had looked in, he said, to see if there was anything he could help about ; but all was done except the few last things to be moved away the next day, Seth would be back presently to walk with his wife over to her father's, where Patty had already gone. It needed very little managing for Reuben to accomplish what he had come for, and Martha hardly knew whether to feel glad or

frightened when she found herself alone with him on the road toward home.

"You don't mind going home by the marsh road, do you?" Reuben said. "It is n't much farther, and I don't know but what this is our good-by, Martha." She turned in among the willows without a word. Grandma must wait this once; what temptation would there be to stay away from home in the years to come for another lingering walk with Reuben? It seemed at first as if it were to be a silent good-by, though Martha longed to have Reuben break the spell. Each step forward was a precious second gone. Speak herself she could not.

"Perhaps you wondered, Martha, why I've never come near you since that night down on the beach?"

It was not put quite as a question, and yet he seemed to wait for the answer.

"I wondered at first," she said; "and then it seemed to grow natural. You'd said all there was to say, and I knew there were heaps of things you had to think of. I knew you'd do what was right, Reuben."

"We trusted each other, then; and I suppose

that's about all we shall have to live on for a good while to come. Trust, that is to say, that we shall always stay good friends wherever we are."

"That we've been for a good while,—ever since we were little. I don't know what should change us now."

Reuben's whole manner had been so weary and discouraged that Martha wondered why he had made any exertion to bring about a meeting which seemed so unlikely to leave her any happier. Why, she would rather have said good-by on the church porch with all Portsea about her, comforting herself with the thought that the touch of his hand in hers had been different from his farewell to any one else. He did not speak again till they came out from the dimness of the willows on to the bridge built over the creek where it ran through the marsh meadows down to the sea; a place full of recollections of frolic and clam diggings down below, in the days when a scramble through mud and wet was part of the pleasant time; happier days still when this walk was chosen as the longest way home. As it came to the minds of

both they stood still by the railing, looking out where tide and fog were creeping in from the sea. So they had often stood, and never thought it dreary; but now, on this gray November afternoon, the damp wind seemed to be whispering misery through the long shivering grass. Soon it would be swaying helplessly, as the water washed over it; as helpless as she against this tide of sorrow, drowning out all that made life happiest. Presently Reuben spoke: "I did not bring you here, Martha, just to look over the marsh and think of old times; I guess we shall both think of them often enough. But there's something I wanted to say to you; I don't know as I want any answer. You'll understand, and I shall know you'll recollect."

Martha turned her eyes from the dreary view now, and her face towards his — such a dear, sweet face he thought it was, with the curls ruffling out from under her bright colored hood. Mouth and eyes said: "Trust me now and always;" but she only laid her hand on his without a word.

"Martha, I've thought a good many times that I'd no business to have said what I did to

you on the beach. Only I'd looked it all before, and I did n't seem to be able to tell you I was going, and not a word more. No, don't speak; I don't feel as if I'd any right to let you. When I talked to you that night I did n't look to much more than going back with Martin to work under him till I'd made enough to pay for poor little Ben's doctoring.

"At California wages I could have done that in two or three years easy, sent money out to mother, and come back with a nest-egg. Since that I've talked it over with Martin, and this is what it comes to.

"I don't see as I've any right to throw away the chance I've got, seeing as there's so many depending on it. Martin says that if I'll agree to stay for a certain time — and it's no good for less than six years — we can take a building contract together that'll make me a well-to-do man when we are through with it. Now, Martha, can I do anything else with a clear conscience but go?"

Martha looked out across the marsh: the fog was closing in, and there was little else to see; then wistfully her eyes turned towards Reuben:

"You can't want advice from me; that you would take from somebody who knows; but if you want me to say that I'll believe whatever you do is right, that I do with all my heart."

"I believe you would, Martha. I know you would. How hard life is," he said, shaking the bridge railing with his hand, as if he would throw down the barrier between himself and happiness; "all I want is just here, and I must sheer off and spend the best years of my life trying to keep body and soul together. Lord knows I would n't do it if it was for myself. Living at this price is n't worth the having."

Martha was the tenderest of women, and yet this expression of his sorrow brought back a peace she had not known for weeks. It did not seem as if even the doubt of ever seeing him again would be so hard as the doubt of his love had been. She looked almost cheerful as she said: "No, Reuben, I would n't take it on my conscience to ask you to stay, even if you gave me the chance. But don't let us call it six years. You'll get all the money that Ben will want quicker there than here, I know; but after that don't you think it would be better to live

on a little less. Your mother would say so, I am sure."

She added this last as his face did not show any responsive cheerfulness ; indeed, she almost thought he could not have heard her, he looked so blank and far away. Presently with a heavy sigh, "I don't mind telling you, Martha," he said, "that I've had a mighty heavy load to walk under ever since I was a boy. There's been death and there's been sickness, — just one steady fight for a chance to keep mother and the children with their heads above water. I declare I don't see how it could ever be different if I was to stay here. Six years is a long time, but it's better than never, and that's just what it comes to, Martha. Till I can make enough to keep mother from want I never can begin to live for myself ; I don't know but what I'd rather set my teeth and go to work out there than live here just out of reach of what I want. At least I can think of you safe and comfortable at home."

Poor Martha ! — poor womankind generally ! Whether or no it is hardest for the woman to wait for happiness, or for the man to fight for it ; at

least she always feels as if the greatest suffering stayed with the one left behind. Hard work and the excitement of a new life for Reuben—home and keeping the peace with grandma for her. The thought flashed in and out of Martha's mind, but all that Reuben felt was the comfort of the look with which she said, "I see, Reuben, and I'll wait patiently, if it's for ten years. But I wish I could help you any way; if I could do something for your mother." She spoke the last words a little hesitatingly, but his look met hers readily.

"Yes, I know very well all you'd do, dear, if she would let you; but poor mother's life's been such hard work I think she's forgotten how to make use of bits of comfort as they come along."

Reuben could not add that, beside Mrs. Wilson's jealous fear of being looked down upon for her poverty, as all Portsea knew, Martha would certainly be regarded as a dangerous intruder, if his mother had a suspicion that in the dimmest future she had the dimmest hope of becoming Reuben's wife. A marriageable girl was her red flag. To get up before dawn and go to bed

after midnight seemed to Mrs. Wilson only the natural routine of a mother's life; but to see Reuben prepare himself for singing-school could not be borne without the saying of so many dismal texts out of the Old Testament, and such hustling of the younger children that they had grown to think that yellow soap and Saturday night's scrubbing had as irritating an effect on their mother's temper as on their skins.

"Mother can't but feel better for having you go to see her sometimes; I can trust you to make her begin to love you against the days she'll have a right to you, as well as me. But, Martha, I'm not going to tell her, I'm not going to tell anybody, what I've said to you. No, dear, it's the only right way. Some folks would say I ought to have gone away without saying one word to you, so long as I can't offer you anything but words for years to come. I said to myself if it's a comfort to me to tell Martha I love her, it'll be a comfort to her to think of it after I'm gone. Nobody'll ever know from me, and never would, if I was to come back and find ——"

"Stop, Reuben. Maybe you'll find a woman

grown a good deal older with waiting for you ; but it 'll be only waiting for happiness that can't come till you bring it."

"Then it 's good-by now, though I shall see you again before I go." A loving kiss, and they turned homeward, and hand in hand walked through the closing twilight. At the gate he took her in his arms once more, and Martha very well knew that the good-by was not only to Reuben, but to a certain part of her old cheery self.

CHAPTER IV.

WAITING AND WATCHING.

I took up the old days
Like some lost book we dropt in the long grass
On such a happy summer afternoon,
When last we read it with a loving friend,—
And find in autumn, when the friend is gone,
The grass cut short, the weather changed, too late.

—AURORA LEIGH.

IF there were to be an offer for sealed proposals to reconstruct this old world on modern principles, making life in it an easier matter, I wonder if the majority would not suggest, among other improvements, that a glimpse of the future should be given to prepare us for any trouble in store. The planners of such a change would all be young ; for there is no knowledge which comes more surely with age than this : that hope lives on this side of the merciful veil, though faith and peace may wait for us beyond.

Martha Symmes said many times to herself, in the first years of Reuben's absence, that it would be so much easier for her if she could

but know when it would be over. Here she was wearying herself because he had spoken of six years, and she could never bring herself to believe that he would have to stay as long as that. It was within the first two years that he sent home money enough to pay the city doctor, who gave his brother Ben not only great alleviation to his pain, but to the mother the satisfaction of knowing that all had been done which money could accomplish. If Reuben had done so much in two years, why should it be so much longer before he would have made enough for them to begin life upon? Martha was too faithful a woman in all her home duties to acknowledge to herself any longing to have an end come even of her grandmother's worryings and scoldings; but it is certain that in the castle in the air, where it was her recreation to go at the end of the day's work, there only lived "father and Reuben and I." Whether grandma was to take up her abode in a distant L to the castle, or in a still more remote haven of rest, was entirely indefinite, — one idea as much as the other; the only distinct thing was that father must live with them. And four or five

years after Reuben had been gone father died, and a world of care began for Martha — not poverty. Mr. Symmes and his father before him had been thrifty men, and Martha's share of what was left would be enough to prevent the pain of home-sickness being added to her sorrow. She might live on in the old home, — and very grateful she was that it could be so, — though there were days at first when she almost felt she would rather be in a strange house than have to hear the slam of the front gate without father's whistle to say he was coming.

Wherever she should live in Portsea she must be lonely, for after all her sister's forebodings, the change to the West had proved so successful that no one ever thought of their return. Teaching out there paid even better than here, and Seth was a different man, — slept and ate, and breathed in peace. Grandma always spoke of his "pipes" with a resentful air, as of an instrument upon which he could play in Portsea quite as well as anywhere else, if he would only give his mind to it, and not be always roaming. She evidently thought that a great deal of prairie and buffalo was included in any Western

life, — even in that of a schoolmaster. If Abby had ever wished to come back to Portsea, all desire ceased after the birth of two strong, healthy boys, whom she could enjoy without trembling. Perhaps the only drawback was a plaintive fear lest the pride she took in their beauty was a treachery to the memory of the delicate little creatures who had given her too much anxiety for happiness. So if the sisters were to meet it must be Martha who should make the journey, and that could never be while their grandmother lived. Abby had been too much occupied with her own sorrow in leaving home to give much heed to Martha's depression, — indeed, had supposed it came from the same cause as her own ; so she had gone without knowing anything of the relations between Reuben and her sister. With no one to whom she could put into words the story of what had passed, Martha sometimes felt as if it could not be true that she had ever heard Reuben say he loved her, — like the doubt of sound in the desert, with no ears to receive it. Once in a while came a letter, — the letter of a hard-worked man, for whom it would have been difficult at any time to express much

on paper. But the inside had been touched by no hand but his, and the words, meagre as they were, said the one thing Martha wanted to hear. Perhaps Reuben would have been more diffuse if he had not always thought that particulars would be learned from his letters to his mother. Poor soul ! when she boasted of the trouble her boy took to send long accounts of everything he saw, she did not know that they were all inspired by the idea that Martha would read them. And Martha, after finding that she was classed with Lucy Jane Carter, felt that her few lines, saying he was well, and "remained as always," were comfort enough ; and was very careful that there should be no connecting link in Mrs. Wilson's mind between a letter from her son and a visit from Martha. There was no secret about her own letters. So long as her father lived they came enclosed to him, and always had some message about Californian farming ways. After that it seemed only natural that Reuben's sorrow for a death which was considered a loss to all Portsea should make him write once in a while to his old playmate. Even Mrs. Wilson began to allow herself to regard Martha's visits

as a disinterested attention. Lucy Jane Carter had given quite as much offence by accepting a flourishing butcher instead of pining for Reuben, as she ever had by hinting at a desire to see his letters. Then, too, all Portsea had adopted the idea that Martha Symmes was slaving out her life in the care of her grandmother, though Abram Potter had wanted to marry her ever since he hired the farm after her father's death.

Abram, whose eyes were not keen enough to see that Reuben and the beach and the moonlight all meant love-making to Martha, had been quite as slow in detecting that nothing he could say or do would ever induce her to listen to a word of love from him. Not even when he said, "Seein' he'd hired the farm, an' everything seemed to go straight right along since he took a hold of it, why couldn't they jine hands in the house as well? As for the old lady — landsakes, he guessed he could stand more'n that for Marthy. Why, he'd sign a paper to say he'd read aloud the hardest kind o' chapters out o' the Old Testament for an hour every evenin', soon 's he got his boots off. As for jawin' back at the poor soul — he had n't

boarded to Mis' Foster's all these years 'thout learnin' which way an old lady's fur 's got to be stroked."

Martha did not think it necessary to tell him that when grandma was in her most electric state, the only safe way was to let alone her fur altogether, if you did not wish to be scratched. It was hard work to make Abram believe that what he wished could never be. Indeed, she gave her refusal almost as gently as a dear friend of mine, who was much embarrassed by her would-be-relations calling the next day in state, under the impression that their brother had been accepted instead of refused the evening before. How could Martha say anything unkind to dear old Abram, who had grown up with her and Abby, and was a part of the happy life that seemed to have come to an end.

"Seein's you say so, I suppose it's got to be, but I can't help thinkin' that if you'd take time for 't you might find yourself growin' kinder soft-hearted about me, sooner 'n you'd think for. I'm sure I'd wait ten years if I thought at the end of it you'd walk down the broad aisle with me between meetin's. I won't plague

you with another word, Marthy; but, if you won't take me for a husband, I'll just live your lover all my days."

"Oh, Abram, don't! — *don't* be my lover. I want a friend so. Why can't you be a brother, who knew me when I had father and Abby, and never thought I could be so unhappy? Oh, I *am* so lonesome, and it seems as if I was never going to have anybody to care about me again as long as I live."

They were sitting on the door-steps in the twilight, — grandma taking her ante-go-to-bed nap inside. Abram was so appalled at the idea of Martha with her face hidden in her hands, that there was no form of self-sacrifice he would not have offered if she would only have stopped crying.

"Oh, Marthy dear, how can you say such dreadful things? If it was the offer that did it, I never'll make you another's long's I live. I can't say no more'n that, now can I? You shan't say you want a brother while I'm round. An' we shall have lots to talk about, with the hay, an' the corn, an' that, an' you can always have me to go anywhere with after dark. Now

you won't ever say you're lonesome again, will you, Marthy?"

Abram poured out his questions as if he expected to see Martha dissolve into tears and melt away. He wiped her eyes on his best blue cotton handkerchief; he patted her on the back; he very nearly kissed her, but though he knew exactly what he should have done if he had been accepted, he had never had a sister of his own, and did not feel sure that brothers ever did kiss their sisters. At any rate, it would be better to let her make the advances, and he would always be equal to the occasion, if, as a sister, she ever showed signs of affection. So, with a tact newly-born of his affection, he decided that a late brood of chickens was a perfectly safe topic, leading to nothing dangerously pathetic. No eloquence could have been more successful in making Martha feel that there really was still some one to whom her interests were dear, and she went in to wake up grandma with quite a cheerful smile.

For some time after Abram's new departure in the way of the affection he was to feel for Martha, it was a serious drawback to the pleas-

ure he had in her evident increase of regard, that he did not understand exactly where he stood. Absolutely honest, and absolutely literal as well, his own idea was to be all that a brother should, and nothing more ; and how was he to manage that nothing more? Had he been endowed with a sensitive nature, Martha would have missed a friend more ardent than most lovers in the long run. When Abram had made up his mind that there could be nothing objectionable in a brother's doing many a day's work about his sister's home, in spare hours, taken early and late from his own fields, and had succeeded in making Martha feel as if she really had a right to his services, then the happiness of the new relation helped to drive out the thought of the one he had wished to hold.

At first Portsea was much exercised in its mind at the delay in the announcement it fully expected to receive. Indeed, such a dead blank fell upon the congregation on Sunday, when the period for reading the banns came and passed without the names of Abram Potter and Martha Anne Symmes, that, feeling a lack of excitement, it began to fancy the difficulty lay

with good Mr. Adams ; that he was losing the power of imparting a flavor to his discourses by awful warnings, which could always be applied to a neighbor, if not felt as personal. But no wonder can live beyond its appointed time without feeding ; and, limited as was the sphere of news in Portsea, it was not so utterly forsaken as to be incapable of originating fresh gossip. Somebody's barn burned down, and somebody wondering if somebody else had not set it on fire, — the whole place immediately blazed up, till it seemed as if there might be a general conflagration of character. In this grand confusion of tongues people forgot to go on asking why Abram Potter should be seen turning in at the Symmes' gate so often ; and when peace reigned again it had become a fixed fact that he was in full charge, and might shovel snow, plant seeds, or walk home from church with Martha, without exciting a single — "Don't you suppose ?"

"Be the day never so long,
There comes at length the even song."

The last year of Reuben's absence had begun, and it was a daily thought with Martha that

there would not be another Thanksgiving, another New Year without him.

March lingered late this year. It is to my mind to the dweller in the country the most tedious month in the whole round. Snow, if it comes, has none of the cheerfulness of winter, for it cannot lead to sleighing, only to mud; and the mud has not the hopefulness of April, when one knows that the days of the frost are numbered. This particular March seemed to have eight weeks in it; for it was high time for a letter from Reuben. None had come, either to her or to his mother. She would have been glad to go to Mrs. Wilson's, but did not like either to show too much eagerness, or to suggest anxiety, if the mother had not begun to feel it. It was nearly dark one evening when Abram came in, announcing his arrival with gigantic efforts to clear himself of mud within the small limits of the storm-porch over the back door. Martha was busy in her kitchen, clearing away for the night, grandma looking on from her big chair by the fire. The last six years had made some difference in the old woman. When Mr. Symmes died she fully

intended following him, and, as a preliminary, took to her bed at once ; but Martha's entreaties not to be left alone had given her a wonderful impulse. Perhaps it was the first time in her unattractive life that the poor soul had been made to feel she was absolutely necessary to any one ; and to be taken at our best is by far the greatest help towards well-doing that we can any of us receive. I do not mean that even in these days grandma's eyes had grown less keen to the foibles of her neighbors, or her tongue less sharp to reprove them ; but her granddaughter could always please her, as indeed it was the one object of Martha's life to do.

"Ben a havin' company to tea, ain't you, marm ?" Abram said. "Marthy's rather late with her cups an' sarcers."

"Mis' Briggs stopped in to tea. She's only just gone. Pity you had n't come a bit sooner ; you could a' seen her home."

"Wull, there now, so I might ;" and Abram's eyes accomplished a slow twinkle at Martha. "I thought I see somebody a' comin' along, just as I was tryin' to find out what kind o' night it was goin' to be."

"Have you been up to the Corner?" grandma asked. "I thought there might ha' been a letter from Abby to-night."

"Yes, I stopped in o' purpose, but there wan't a line for nobody."

Martha had paused in her work to hear the answer, and then, with a little sigh, went on.

"Mis' Briggs was full of a new notion. I des say she don't know nothin' at all about it; but she says they 're talkin' about havin' one o' them roads that goes snortin' round the country run right across the mashes."

Any one unused to grandma's description of the new or unapproved might not have known that she meant the railroad; but Abram answered: "They was all talkin' about it up there to-night. I guess it 's pretty well settled. Tall thing, it 's goin' to be for the town."

"Don't see no sense in anybody's wantin' more 'n the critturs that the Lord provides for gettin' 'round with."

"Why, grandma," Martha said, cheerily, "I'm sure I've heard you describe what the old folks said when the turnpike was built and the stage began to run. You said they thought that

there 'd never be any young ones left at home if it was so easy to get away."

"Well, yes, dear, I know they did; but then hosses seem different from meddlin' with things that nobody ever heard tell of in the Bible. One thing, Abram, I ain't goin' to stand: Mis' Briggs says the folks that 's doin' the road's got a right to put it right through my kitchen, if so be 's they see fit. They'll have to run over me an' my rockin'-chair if they 're goin' to do it, that's all."

"Mis' Briggs gin'rally doos know more'n the rest on us, but she's heerd crooked this time. Fur 's I know, the road ain't a' comin' nigh here. To hear some of 'em talk to-night up at the Corner you 'd a' thought they was all goin' to waller in money the rest o' their days. Over Dobbsville way everybody's cock sure the road can't get anywheres if it don't go through their front yard, an' they 're goin' to charge just as if they was sellin' a Californy mine. The railroad folks 'll have to turn a good many sharp corners to please everybody."

"Well, they could n't muster money 'nough among 'em to pay me for my place over there by

the settin'-room winder, so I'm glad they ain't a' goin' to try. But talkin' about Californy, Mis' Briggs had a story about Hosee Martin bein' dead out there. Where was you when she was a' talkin', Marthy? Oh, I guess you'd gone up chamber."

"No, I did n't hear her say anything about it," Martha said, looking a little anxious. "Abram, did you hear anything to-night at the store?"

Abram, who had retired under the table to examine something about the hinges, answered, with a muffled, "Nothin' for sartin."

"Reuben used to write once in awhile to father, an' he doos now to Marthy. But you ain't heerd this good while, have you?"

"No," Martha said, and then stood lost in a maze of thought, as to whether it was possible, if his partner were dead, Reuben might not now be on his way home.

"I dunno as he'd care to write partickerly to say t' Hosee'd made away with all their money; but that was one thing Mis' Briggs said."

"What?" Martha asked, in a tone of amazement.

"Yes, she said there was different stories.

Some said Hosee was dead, an' some talked about his goin' to the mines ; anyway the money was gone. He could n't a-took it with him if he was dead, an' I sh'd think it must be some'eres round," Grandma said, with a general idea that wherever there was a stocking or a teapot to be found money must be safe.

Abram had emerged from under the table, but was so occupied in whittling a wedge that he had taken no part in the conversation ; but, when Martha repeated : " Did n't you hear anything at all about it ? If it was true I should think it would be all over town," — he answered : " They was all talkin' to onst both sides o' the stove, an' givin' different idees, so't I did n't seem to get much notion, only everybody thought he knew more 'n the rest on 'em. The upshot of it all was that Hosee'd gone, an' the money'd gone, an' which way they'd gone nobody knew."

" And Reuben ? " Martha asked, " Did n't they say a word about him ? "

" Oh, they said a heap, an' they did n't know the fust thing. There," Abram said, laying down his knife and bit of wood ; " I'd made up

my mind not to speak till I knowed what I was talkin' about. 'T ain't much, but fur's I know it comes to this: Reuben'd been dummin' along, workin' and dooin' his dooty, — kind o' way he always had to home," Abram said, with a nod in a parenthesis to Martha, "an' Hosee, as I understand, rather took the genteel part of the business, — holdin' the puss, an' that cos he knew the ways out there. An' when Reuben begun to get ready to come home an' make his calkerlations accordin', lo an' behold! there wan't nothin' to show for all the work he'd done. What's more, there wan't no Hosee on the premises, nuther."

"But where does the story come from?" Martha asked; "I wish I could see Mrs. Wilson. Reuben must have written about it to her."

"Bless you, I should ha' stopped there, an' had my story all ready to tell you if there'd been anything to hear; but the mail is n't in, an' all anybody knows come through some men that Sam Richards met over to the city. I'm sure I hope Mis' Wilson won't get track of it till she can know the truth."

"If she don't know by to-morrow mornin', it'll be 'cause Mis' Briggs has lost her tongue," grandma remarked. "She was all agog to go there to-night, but I guess I turned her by sayin' how that new horse o' Deacon White's they set so much by 's gone lame. So she thought she'd step in an' tell 'em she heered they'd been cheated. Seems to thrive on other folks' troubles, Mis' Briggs doos. Dunno but what it's like pickles, an' brings out the taste of her own good things. Guess you'd better help this old granny o' your'n to bed, Marthy. Why, child alive, you look as if you'd ought to be there yourself — you're all gin out."

"Don't you fret, Marthy," Abram whispered, as he bade her good-night. "You shall have the first news that comes." Abram was not brilliant, but he managed to hammer out something very near the truth as he walked home, and settled with himself that "Marthy'd need a heap o' care took of her."

CHAPTER V.

LEFT ALONE.

We, too, have autumns when our leaves
Drop loosely through the dampened air ;
When all our good seems bound in sheaves,
And we stand reaped and bare.

—LOWELL

It was not a long suspense, for the mail arrived in a few days, and with it a letter for Martha. Abram knew the ways of the household, and brought it after grandma had gone up-stairs for the night, and when Martha would have a quiet hour by herself below. He had heard enough of what was general Portsea knowledge now to give her the letter and say good-night at once. The good fellow would have gone with a very heavy heart if he had known all the sorrow that it held for her. Martha drew her low rocking-chair to the fire, and put the lamp on the light-stand ; then, as she was going to open her letter, laid it down again, and sat a few moments shading her eyes with her hand. If a prayer

were in her heart it was one without words. She scarcely knew for what she would pray, — only that she must draw a long breath before she took the blow. God's will — Reuben's wish — they must be the same for her, and she would be patient whatever the decision.

Reuben told her that a great change had come in his fortunes. His story was not very different from the first report that Abram had heard. In the beginning he and his companion had both worked together; but as time went on it had fallen more to Reuben's share to take charge of the actual building operations, and Martin, with his superior knowledge of business and the country, had enlarged their transactions. Reuben said that up to a certain point all had been done with his approval, and even now he did not believe that Hosea had ever intended to be other than honest to him, and he begged that this should be said in Portsea, and Hosea regarded as a fellow-sufferer with himself. He had been tempted, by what he supposed the certainty of a fortune, to invest their earnings in the share of a gold-digging which had proved worthless, and all was gone. The only ground

he could have for blaming Hosea, Reuben said, was that he himself had not been consulted ; but even if he had been it would probably not have altered the facts. He should have intrusted all to his friend ; but one of the hard things to bear was the thought that he had been too engrossed with his own work to know what was going on, and share the responsibility. All this was told in few words, but they were more than enough for Martha, knowing that they all meant but this — Reuben was not coming home. So far, Martha could not but feel that Reuben's trial in the struggle and mortification of beginning again was heavier than hers ; but there was worse to come.

“Now, Martha dear,” Reuben wrote, “I've got something to say that all but takes the courage out of me. When I went away from home I did n't think I was asking too much of you, if you loved me, to wait six years ; in my heart I did n't think it would be quite so long as that. Now it's different. Work and disappointment make me feel as if I'd been away a dozen years, and when I think of a dozen more spent the same way there's nothing for it but

to say good-by. I shall stay and fight it out and work for mother, and I can't hope to do more than that. At this moment I have got fifty dollars lying in my desk, and to-morrow I begin to work by the day again as I did when I started. I don't tell mother that I shall never see Portsea again, but I can tell you that I believe if I do it will be as a much older man. The greatest comfort I can think of now is that I haven't hung a millstone round your neck. There, — perhaps, I ought not to have said that ; but you know, and you'll always remember, that I loved you dearly when my love was any good to you. Don't answer this ; nothing can make things any different. But I shall like a friendly letter once in a while ; and if we never see each other again, don't you forget that you never had a better friend in this world than Reuben Wilson."

Martha had no tears to shed over this sorrow, which must be borne in silence all the rest of her days, if Reuben's words came true. The log on the fire fell apart, blazed up, and lay in separate piles of ashes before Martha unclasped her cold hands from her knee and roused her-

self. She had thought out her dumb sorrow; knew that she must not cry out against it; knew that Reuben had decided rightly. As she wearily climbed the stairs, Martha found herself counting up the probable length of years that she must live through, and who among her people had had shorter tasks set them than her poor old grandmother.

In landscape and story a dead level gives little to describe, whether it lies in sunshine or in shade. Into some lives come a succession of tranquil years, whose history is amply recorded in the dates of happy days; others fall into a sorrowful monotony, of which there is as little to tell. That Martha's nature was not a rebellious one had saved her from the active suffering of "kicking against the pricks." Even in the hours when she and her sorrow walked together along the quiet road, or sat at night with no one to question the tears which fell almost without her knowing it, — even then she never doubted Reuben's wisdom in deciding that they should bear their sorrow separately, or ceased to be thankful that she had known the blessing of his love. Eventless as the life was, it was too calm

to leave the lines by which years may be not only counted, but multiplied on some weary faces. "Martha Symmes is growing consider'ble of an old girl," might be said after she had gone home early from the sewing-circle; but there was always some one of the younger people to add: "I don't believe Miss Martha could ever have looked prettier than she does now, she's so sweet and good." So long as she must have a life separate from Reuben, Martha would not for any inducement have spent it elsewhere than in Portsea, which might be their trysting-place, even when youth was gone. So long too as her old grandmother lived, and there was some one to wait and watch for her, she could not feel alone; and the fourth year from the date of Reuben's last love-letter found her at heart a sad woman, but never a discontented one.

Grandma Parker had become such a living monument in Portsea that all her little world was as much surprised to hear that she was failing fast as if she had been in the heyday of youth. There must have been far down in the old woman's heart a touch of romance, that she should have asked to have her bed put down

stairs by the window where she had sat so many years. There she had been lying for days gazing out through all the changing lights of the passing hours, as if she would carry the memory of the scene through the gates so soon to be opened for her. All she had asked was that her grand-daughter should be within reach of her hand, and there were plenty of good neighborly friends to come in and out and leave Martha free to give every one of these last hours to sitting ready to read a verse or two, to stoop to listen to the failing voice, or stroke with gentle touch. There she sat now in the room dimly lighted by shaded lamp and fire. The old lips moved stiffly to say something, and Martha stooped to listen.

"Seems as though I could n't wait to tell your grandpa how sorry I am I spoke so cross." Martha thought she was dreaming, and said, "Oh, he knows you did n't mean it, dear."

"I dunno how he should, when I was bein' cross over an' over again, an' the right time never seemed to come to tell him so. It's queer folks can't take it in at the fust of it; how sorry they 'll be when they come to the end."

"I call this your beginning, grandma," Martha said; but her voice failed as she thought that to her had come the end of what makes home.

"The best o' gals, the best o' gals," her grandmother said over and over, as her fingers feebly stroked Martha's hand. Then suddenly, "I allers felt as if I could n't spare you, dear; but I wish there was somebody now,—I 'm afeard you 'll be terrible lonesome."

"Don't worry about me. Abby says she 'll give Patty to me for a long visit, now the little ones have grown up. You would n't want me to have better company than dear little Patty."

A gleam of the old welcoming smile came back into her face, and almost a brightness to the dim eyes as she said, "I never wanted nothin' better when I could have her, the darlin' creetur. But, Marthy, I want you to have somebody that 'll take care of you, just 's you've been a-takin' care of everybody else all your days. Marthy, where's Reuben Wilson? I ain't seen him this long time."

Martha looked over her shoulder to make sure that the neighbor in charge of the kitchen was busily employed there, and laying her face

on the pillow by her grandmother, she said, "Reuben's been gone a good many years, working hard; but his mother came in to-day to ask after you, and she said that she thought he'd be back now by next spring for a visit."

"I allers liked Reuben better 'n any boy in town. I used to think he liked you too, Marthy. Did n't he never say a word to you."

This first touch ever laid upon Martha's heart through all these years startled her almost as if from a ghostly hand, and she answered without a thought of denial: "He loved me, and he said so before he went away, but he had to go to work for his mother."

"You loved him, did n't you, Marthy?"

"Dearly, grandma, dearly. We waited as long as there was any hope; you remember the time when he lost his money — that's years ago; and now I don't know how it will be even if he comes back."

She threw an arm across her grandmother, as if to hold the only one love on which she might count in this world, and so the two women rested, — the one whose story was told and ended close to the heart beating with the

possibility the world might still hold for her.

Presently the old woman said : "I wished I could ha' stayed and looked at his face. I could ha' told you, Marthy, what it said. I seen a face once when the love was gone out of it, an' I guess death could n't change it no more in my eyes."

For one moment those eyes opened, as if clear vision had come to them, then dropped again ; and Martha said, gently : "Don't worry about anything here, grandma dear. You're going where you'll know how right it all is whatever comes."

The world was over for grandma when she had given this last thought to her who, as the sun rose, sat holding a dead hand in hers, and feeling for the first time absolutely alone.

And now Portsea was again exercised as to what Martha should do. The advice of the whole town would have been hers for the asking, and, indeed, many valuable suggestions reached her quite unasked. Of course she and Abram Potter would be married now, after all their shilly-shallying ; of course she would go

to the West to live with her sister; of course Abby would come to Portsea to live with her. Some one had even gone so far as to say what an excellent thing it would be if the old clergyman could be induced to take a rest after his forty years of service, and then a single man might offer, who would be of a good age for Martha. And in spite of all this wealth of wisdom, — even after an afternoon when the Widow Briggs arrived with a sock in embryo on her needles, and had given advice till the ample leg had developed into a heel, — even then Martha persisted in doing the only thing no one had proposed: to continue to live in her old home by herself, or with only the companionship of a poor widow woman and her child, who had always been befriended by the Symmes household, and who felt now as if heaven had opened to them.

As to the first proposition, — the marrying Abram Potter, — that was not discussed for any length of time, being quenched by Abram himself, who impressed it on the mind of the public by losing his temper for the first time in his life.

Appearing at the corner one evening, soon after Martha was left alone, he was saluted by the wit of the circle, sitting about the stove, as Mr. "Marthy Symmes." Abram grew alarmingly red, and answered: "I s'pose I'm about as stoopid as most folks, an' I can't seem to see the joke o' that, Jacob Morse." He walked to the post-office end of the counter, took his letter, and, having "sot on himself," as he expressed it, was pursuing the wise course of going off with shut lips, when Jacob fired another shot.

"Did n't mean no offense, I'm sure, Abe; only folks thought you had n't got much more to do than hang your hat up in her entry, an' make yourself comfortable. You need n't get mad about that, old man."

"I dunno what you mean about gettin' mad. Cucumbers ain't no cooler than what I be this minute," Abram said, looking amazingly like fighting the group before him. "There's a few words I'd like to say, seein's most o' the town criers seems to be settin' round." He fixed his eyes on the stove funnel as a safe centre of wrath, while they all listened in dumb amaze-

ment, but real interest, at such an usual display of oratory from "Old Abram."

"It seems kind o' undecent in me to make any remark at all about Miss Marthy's gettin' married before her poor old grandma's had time to git seed to growin' on her grave. Seein's folks thinks fit to talk about her in her trouble, I should like just to mention that if there's a man good enough to be her husband I ain't happened to make his acquaintance up to the present time. I'm pretty proud to be her friend, that's all I know." Here Abram experienced a singular choking sensation in the region of his coat collar, but he cleared his throat and went on: "An' if anybody wanted me to run for President, an' it stood in the way of planting Miss Marthy's spring garding, they might whistle for me, that's all." And with this climax, Abram jammed his hat over his eyes and stalked out, leaving a solemn hush round the stove, broken at last by Jacob Morse himself saying, "Hooroar for 'Old Abram!'"

CHAPTER VI.

JUBILATE.

To-day a song is on my lips,
Earth seems a paradise to me;
For God is good, and lo! my ships
Are coming home from sea!

EVERY one was quite satisfied with Martha's arrangements when Patty came early in the autumn for a long visit. Abby wrote that she was willing to spare her, not only for the comfort she would be to Martha, but because she wanted her daughter to know and be known by her old friends at home. Portsea fully appreciated the compliment, and Patty was a great favorite for her mother's sake and her own. There was a certain life about the Western girl, coming from a town still in its own first youth, and where every one had an equal share in building up the prosperity of the place. The little New England country town seemed to Patty truly dignified in its comparative antiquity, and to be living in a house where she made one of

the third generation of occupants, would be something to tell of when she went back to ten-year-old Carthage. It had not borne its name so long as she, now in the freshness and prettiness of her eighteen years.

For Martha the coming of her niece was a revelation of forgotten gayety. Peace and quiet cheerfulness had grown to be a part of her religion; but this enjoyment of life, the laughing for the pleasure of being amused, was a new sensation;—no, not new: it was only her old self come back to the old house; and in being with Patty she almost felt as if she were seeing her own double. If she ever wished to suppress the superabundant gayety of the girl, she had not the heart to do it,—it seemed so delightful to imagine what it would have been to act herself out without the fear of being looked at over poor grandma's spectacles.

“Putty snug-lookin’ pair, you air,” Abram said, as he found them sitting between daylight and dark by the fire. One had been telling the other something which amused them, and no wonder that Abram was struck with the likeness in the two smiling faces turned toward him.

"Marthy, if you want to know how you looked the fust season you set in the singin'-seats, there you be, ex-act."

Patty rubbed her cheek lovingly against her aunt's shoulder, and said: "Oh, Mr. Potter, do tell me you think I shall look just as much like Aunt Martha when I'm where she is now."

"I think a heap o' you, Patty. It's natural I should, seein' 's I knew you before you was old enough to set alone on the floor. For all that, I ain't goin' to set you up with thinkin' there's goin' to be any such good luck as havin' two Aunt Marthys in this world. No harm tryin', though, an' I will say I think you've took a good start. If you'd like to have somethin' to remember yourself by, you might go over to the city an' have your pictur' took. I reckon your complect'd have a better chance o' bein' done justice to than mine got. Want to see how big a fool I can look like?" he said, pulling a package out of his coat-pocket, and handing it to them with a delighted grin, ready to deepen into a roar at their first glance.

It was fortunate that the original of the picture set an example of taking the full measure

of amusement out of it, for it would have been difficult for any one to have contemplated it soberly. In the early days of daguerreotyping the efforts of a cheap and inexperienced artist were apt to be anything but complimentary to the sitter, and this specimen looked nearly as much like a sketch of the moon with mountains and hollows in bold contrast as it did like dear, good Abram Potter. His thick crop of sun-burned curly hair was a black pile over the round face, where nose and cheeks stood out in bold relief above the mouth, which apparently Abram must have extended to its amplest capacity in amazement as to what might be going to happen. Out of this sphere looked a pair of round white eyes, puckered at the corners, and ready to close if anything should go off with a bang. Patty looked first at the picture, then at Abram, and then laughed till she cried; while he, bringing his big hands down on his knees, was entirely delighted with her appreciation.

"I knowed it'd tickle you haff to death. But did you ever — now, *did* you ever see such a lookin' nimshi? An' the best of it all is, it looks like me — it doos, and no mistake. Why,

I had it took to send to my sister down East, an' I'll bet you her youngest—he's dreadful smart—he'll ask for a stick o' candy soon's he sees it. I know that's just the way I look sometimes when I'm settin' listenin' to a story, an' waitin' for the joke to come in."

Patty assented in a fresh outburst, but her Aunt Martha said, reprovingly, "There, I can't help laughing, because it does seem to look like you, just by accident. But what's the good of a picture if it's going to make anybody laugh at their best friend."

"Just you two go and be took together, and they'll pay something to let it hang in a shop window, I'll bet. But land, what was a feller to look like settin' with his head backed up into a kind of a pitchfork. Presently the man he says, 'I'm ready if you air.' An' I says, 'Gee up, then, for I shall have the fidgets if I set here much longer;' an' then he says, 'Would you please to smile.' Says I, 'I will when I've got su'n to smile at.' 'Can't you imagine the young lady lookin' 'round the corner of the screen at you?' says he. Then I got mad, an' I says, 'I guess any young lady I know's got

somethin' else to do but play peek-a-boo 'round that screen.' He did n't seem to like that, so then he said, 'You can't expect to have a very handsome pictur' took if you set like that.' So I says, 'I guess I should be disappointed if I expected to look handsome, which ever way I sot.' I only meant to make him feel easy about my expectin' to have more 'n my money's worth, but I tell you, he looked mad as thunder, an' he said, 'Now,' an' wrapped his head up in a black cloth. I just set and waited, but I kept my eye on him. I thought I was in for it, an' there 'd be some kind of a flare-up. In a minute he went an' shet himself up in a closet. When he came out he was as smilin' as you please, an' he says, 'I think you look uncommon well under the circumstarnces.' I did n't know what he called the circumstarnces; but I guess if I ever look any wuss 'n that, it 'll be with somethin' I shan't get over in a hurry."

Abram so thoroughly enjoyed being made fun of by Patty that Martha felt she might with an easy conscience lean back in her chair and enjoy it too. And how happy she was in the sitting there with a sense that there was no one else to

be thought of, or to worry about, — nothing to do at this moment but listen to Patty's pleasant voice and laugh, and feel that this was her own cheerful home revived. For that half hour she might sit in placid comfort ; but Abram had a piece of news in store which would bring back the quick heart-beats of years ago. He had not come, good fellow, only to laugh and talk, but had thought that a hearty laugh might not be a bad introduction to an agitating piece of news he had just heard. No one but himself should be the bearer of it, he was determined ; and fleet-footed he must be, if it were not to reach Martha from some one who had no idea that it would be more to her than to any one else, — that Reuben Wilson had reached Portsea a month or two sooner than was expected. When Patty had had her laugh out, Abram pushed his chair a little out of the circle. He could speak his news more easily, he thought, if he were out of the range of Martha's eyes.

“I see somebody up at the Corner to-night, Marthy, who was quite unexpected to me. Did you know Reuben Wilson got home last night?”

The gentle smoothing of Patty's hand on her

aunt's knee was stopped for a moment, and to Martha herself it seemed for that instant as if her heart stood still. But hand and voice were steady as she said, "I knew he was coming, but not so soon. Mrs. Wilson told me this week that she should look for him any time this winter. Do you know why he came now?"

"Everybody was asking all the questions they could lay their tongues to, so I thought I'd hold mine, for a change. I heard him say, though, that things had turned out so much better 'n he expected he thought he'd come home an' look round a while. Spoke very handsome of Hosee, he did, an' said they'd ben the best of friends through all their misfort'ns. I guess he was glad of the chance to speak up, bein' Saturday night, an' everybody there."

"And he looks," — Martha said, hesitatingly, "a good deal changed, I suppose. It's ten years this November."

"Looks fus' rate, he doos," was the cheery answer. "Changed, — why of course he has in ten years. So've we all. Only seems to me we've changed outside, an' he's changed inside — some way."

Patty laughed. "Why, how did you get at his inside man if you didn't ask any questions?"

Abram screwed up his eyes as if he were trying to decipher a puzzle, and rubbed his knees reflectively. "Wull, there you have me, Patty. I guess I must ha' felt it in my bones. I don't gen'rally take an idee till somebody hits me over the head with it. It was n't that he was any ways set up, — land, no! He asked me about the farm, an' my sister Liza. Why, he wanted to know about my old oxen. But all the same, I knew he'd ben seein' an' doin' more'n ever I heerd tell of, — while I'd gone on in Portsea makin' just the same kind o' furrers in my fields all these years. But he was mighty pleasant," Abram said, glancing at Martha, and then fixing his eyes, wide open now, on the fire.

"I can just remember Reuben Wilson," Patty said; "I should like to know any one who had travelled so much. Did n't he used to come here to go to singing-school with you, Aunt Martha?"

"Yes, indeed, many a time," her aunt said, relieving herself with a long breath, which she

did not mean to sound like a sigh. "I'm afraid he would n't care much for singing-school now. I should think Portsea must seem like a very small place to him."

"There it is,—there were folks to-night askin' him if Portsea did n't look very small. They might as well ha' asked him if he did n't think his mother was a very old lady."

"What did he answer?" Patty asked.

"Why, it was just Reuben all over. He said it looked like home, an' that was what no other place in the world could."

"That was good," Patty said, energetically. "I know I should like him. Don't you think he will come to see you, Aunt Martha,—even if he does n't want to go to singing-school?"

Abram felt he had accomplished his task successfully; and if Patty were going to ask searching questions, perhaps her aunt would like to answer them without a listener, so he said good-night, and departed. After he had gone the two women still sat as he had left them, without speaking.

"What are you thinking about, dear?" Aunt Martha said presently, coming out of her own

thoughts and looking at the earnest face gazing into the fire.

"Now, what *do* you suppose I was thinking of? All about Abram Potter, and what a dear old soul he is, and why he never got married?"

"Want of the right woman, I suppose," her aunt said, glad that Patty was looking at the fire and not at her.

"But I wonder," Patty said, "that there never has been the right woman to see how good and kind he is, and what a good husband he 'd make."

"It never seems to me that people marry just because they've found the best man or the best woman, but because the time's come, — or the love's come, I suppose. You see, when we were all young," — and Martha laughed heartily with a sudden recollection of young days, — "Abram was just the same kind, good-natured fellow he is now; but, I do not know how it was, he was always blundering. If he borrowed a slate at school, he'd be sure to break it; and when he dragged me on his sled I knew I should be upset into a snow-drift. I think he must have improved very much, — or I have."

"I can see just why he should n't have taken a girl's fancy," Patty said, wisely, and of course I don't mean that he could have expected anybody like you, Aunt Martha, to want to marry him. But just such another as he is might have cared about him."

"It's not so very easy to find just such another as he is, Patty, and you can't think too well of him. I'm ashamed to think how I used to laugh at him when I was a girl. I should have been badly enough off in these last years if I had not had him to look after me like a brother, as he has. I think one difficulty about his marrying would be that the sort of woman that might put up with his rough ways would n't suit the best part of him, so I'm afraid he'll go unmated."

"If I was going to stay in Portsea I should not let anybody have him. I should keep him for my own — uncle, or something." Patty finished that portion of her thinking, and began again: "And about Reuben Wilson, Aunt Martha — what kind is he?"

"A very pleasant kind when he went away, ten years ago."

"But why did he go off, in the first place?" Patty asked.

Then Martha told her the whole story of his struggle to help his mother and the younger ones, and the need there was that he should exile himself. It was so long since she had had the chance to talk of Reuben that it was a pleasure to pour out to a hearer who, having no key to the past, listened only as to a story of an interesting life.

"That is what I call a hero! Oh, Aunt Martha, I hope he won't disappoint me when I see him. Is he old?"

"A little older than I am, — thirty-five, perhaps. Does that seem too old for a hero?"

"I'll try to make it do. He could n't be very young, you know, to have done all that. How proud you must be to have known such a man well. You did know him very well, didn't you?"

"Yes, I don't remember the time when I didn't know him. He was a big boy at school when I was one of the little girls, and was very good to me. Your father was teacher then, and Reuben was a great favorite of his, and used to

come and study with him after he left school, so that he was always coming and going among us."

"How queer it seems," Patty said; "I must have seen him very often when I was little. I wonder if he would remember me." She mused a few minutes, and then said, "How will it be, Aunt Martha? Do you feel as if you should begin where you left off with him?"

But she had cast a line into the depth Martha had feared to sound. She answered with all the cheerfulness she could muster, "He'll be the old friend, all the same, — I don't doubt that; but it may take a little while to pick up the dropped stitches. See the clock, Patty; and there's Nora locking up in the kitchen."

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

In my ears
The sound of waters — there he stood, my king!
—AURORA LEIGH.

THE next day was Sunday. Martha had always kept her place in the choir, and though she sometimes told them that she thought they ought to fill it with some younger voice, no one was willing to spare her. But when Patty came she was received as a member by right, and joined the sopranos in a place by her aunt's side. There was nothing said of her being a substitute; but Martha often made her so, for it was such a pleasure to her to lean back in her seat and listen to Patty's voice, as if it were to her younger self. One does not live through ten years, holding such alternations of hope and depression as these had brought to Martha, without coming to feel that, though still a young woman, there was a sense of rest in standing

aside to watch and sympathize with those as confident as she had been that success was the most natural thing to happen.

On this day Martha would gladly have stayed at home. It seemed to her now that it had come, — as if a new agitation, even of happiness, was more than she could bear ; but what should she say as excuse ? The always-to-be-commanded headache became a complicated mystery in her consciousness of the real reason ; so when Patty answered her preliminary doubt with, “Oh, Aunt Martha dear, I can’t possibly stay at home, because I want to see Reuben Wilson, — of course I’m dying to hear the sermon, too, — and I don’t want to go without you. Do come ; there’s a dear ——,” go she did without a struggle.

Those of the choir who were not fortunate enough to sit near a peep-hole in the green moreen curtain hanging in front of the gallery had no delicacy at all in standing up to see Reuben Wilson walk down the aisle with his mother on his arm. There might be disappointment and pain in the old age before Mrs. Wilson, though let us hope nothing to compare

with the hard middle life she had gone through ; but nothing would ever take away or mar in her mind the memory of that proud Sunday morning, — the morning when she, the forlorn, hard-worked widow woman, for so many years called “poor Mrs. Wilson,” passed before the congregation leaning on the arm of the best son in all Portsea, and one of the richest men. Do not be hard on her if that thought mingled with her Sabbath rejoicings. Thoughts are very unmanageable visitors ; and truly it seems to me that it requires a long acquaintance with prosperity to enable us to ticket our blessings according to their due value. For how much of her life it had been one of its duties that every hard-earned cent should add something to the comfort of her children, and now, please God, all that was over forever. Martha could make no exertion to look, as the rest did, — her chance would come when they all stood up to sing. But when that moment arrived her knees trembled so that it seemed as if they would not support her, and Patty, glancing at her as the rest rose, looked quite startled, and whispered, “How pale you are ! Don’t stand up ; I will sing for both.”

Martha's place came at the end of the seat, and the end of the curtain as well. A slight movement would enable her to look below. There was not much to see ; not much, at least, for a woman who was gazing at what her eyes and mind had been longing for all these years. Reuben was standing looking over the hymn book with his mother. It was a little side pew ; but Martha's eyes were very quick, and as the light from a window fell upon him she felt she should have known him at once. It seemed to her there was fully the change of the ten years in his looks. He was broader, — she felt as if she had forgotten how tall he was, — and as the sun shone out she fancied she could distinguish gray in his hair. But it was Reuben — Reuben's motions which she saw ; and when at some sudden burst of the women's voices he lifted his head suddenly and looked at the gallery, she drew back, feeling — though it was impossible — as if their eyes had met. She would look no more, but cover her eyes and thank God that at least they were under one roof together, breathing the same air, listening to the same words. As Reuben raised his eyes he did,

indeed, look towards the end of the gallery, where, as he recollected so well, Martha's seat had been, and his own not very far away. She was not there ; or, at least, — and he passed his hand over his eyes, — the face he saw could not be hers, and yet how like ! Even when he left home Martha looked older than that ; but the girl on whom his eyes were fixed seemed to him at this distance as if it were her very self in the days when he first began to think her the sweetest and best girl in Portsea.

Martha determined that when service was over she would not reach the porch in time to make one of the crowd which she was sure Mrs. Wilson would expect to gather around Reuben. She had not the nerve to go through their first meeting now. So very patiently did she linger to hear the details of Mrs. Thompson's last "attack," and her fears for the next one, Patty all the while wistfully looking back and wishing that Aunt Martha would not be so very sympathetic. Martha felt almost guilty in her powers of manœuvring, but was consoled when she found how effectual they were, and that she and Patty walked out of church the very last. It

was a blustering afternoon, and Martha consented readily to Patty's suggestion that she should stay quietly at home, and nurse the cold she was willing to agree must be the reason for her languor and white cheeks. She was beginning to think herself very weak and foolish if she could not even bear to meet the happiness longed for so many years. Patty insisted upon treating her as an invalid, and before she started for church left her aunt comfortably settled in her rocking-chair, with her Sunday books on the little stand at her elbow. Martha read her chapter and her hymn, and though she found her attention wandering from the old-fashioned book of sermons, — which she read as much for the association with her grandmother as for any great pleasure to be derived from them, — still she found the sense of unrest passing away. The book had been lying in her lap for some time, and her thoughts came back from she scarcely knew where out of the past, when the striking of the clock made her look up to find that Patty must be on her way from church by this time, if she had not lingered. She went to the window looking down the road, and two

figures were just in sight. Patty, she thought, — and when they had passed that large tree she should be quite sure who was the man walking at her side, not with Abram Potter's lounging stride, but firm, erect, and stepping with a purpose. Even in the distance she knew it was Reuben Wilson with whom Patty was chatting as to an old friend, while he looked down on her smiling and well pleased. Martha instinctively drew back within the shade of the room, then said to herself, "What folly! Why should she hesitate to meet her dear old friend otherwise than heartily. Surely friends always, whatever changes might have come to him." So she stood at the window to return a smile for the triumphant little nod Patty gave as she led her hero through the gate, and was ready with outstretched hand when the door opened.

"You escaped me this morning, Martha," Reuben said, as his hearty grasp closed over hers; "I looked everywhere in the porch. I was afraid I was going to be disappointed again; but Patty — she says I may call her so, though it seemed a great liberty to me — told me I need not wait for a week-day visit."

"No, indeed," Martha said.

"And only think, Aunt Martha," Patty went on, looking radiantly satisfied and pretty, "we met in the singing-seats. Mr. Reuben (you see we are just going back to old times) came to take the place where he used to sit, and there was I in your seat."

Reuben had it on his lips to bring up the recollection of an evening still in his mind, when she had teased to go with them to the church, but a sudden shyness came over him, and a feeling that not quite yet had come the time for recalling those days.

Patty's entire unconsciousness that anything was there except what she thought she read plainly enough in the meeting of two old friends was an immense help. I suppose we have all, in more or less degree, gone through that blank sensation almost inevitably following the end of a silence we have so wished to break. Our friend has come, — the suspense is over ; what have we to do now but pour out all we have felt whenever that name was in our thought ? And instead of that we sit dumb, as we gradually take in the certainty that the dear presence is

there ready and waiting for speech to come. Words would have passed slowly between Reuben and Martha, if they had not had Patty as a connecting link. In all Martha's imaginings of how they should come together there had never been the need of anything beyond one another ; but now she was very thankful for Patty's eager questions and interest in so much which she herself would not quite have known how to ask. How he had lived and where — with what sort of people — beautiful scenery and rough life, — he was obliged to describe it all. And he did it most graphically ; Martha listening as if to some great traveller, and all the while conscious that though it was Reuben telling the story, nothing could have better shown the change in the man. It was not only that he had seen more, but he had so mingled with other men that all which seemed strange to these women was his every-day life. Only in the old roads at home would he now find himself a stranger. They had all drawn round the fire ; Martha a little on one side, rather quiet, but full of content in listening and watching how well her little Patty took her part in the

conversation, and pleased that Reuben thought her questions intelligent and well worth the answering.

"What an exciting life men can lead," Patty said at last. "But, Mr. Reuben, won't it be — is n't Portsea rather a quiet place to come back to?"

"It's home, Patty, and that's a good deal to a man who has had no more of it than he could make for himself out of one room, sometimes only a tent, in all these years."

"I'm afraid," Patty said, smiling, "if I were a man I should be contented to know that the home was there to come to when I was sick or sorry. I should do a good deal of travelling away from it while my strength held out."

Martha would have liked to check the catechising, which had so much meaning for herself; but Reuben looked only pleased with the pretty little questioner, and said: "That's just it. We men are such boasters we don't tell about our sick and sorry times. I've had plenty of them when, if sitting down and crying for my mother to come and take care of me would have done any good, I'd have cried with as good a will as ever I did when I was a little chap."

"Oh, yes, but then you did n't feel so when you were well again. Don't look at me as if I was very hard-hearted, Aunt Martha. Father and I are always travelling round on maps. If I was a man, I don't think I should feel easy while there was a corner of the world I had n't looked into."

"What a traveller's wife you 'd make," Reuben said.

"I suppose I take it from father. Mother says she's thankful he'll never have money enough to go far; she would n't know where to look for him if he had the chance to start when the fit's on him."

"You two sisters have never met in all these years, then?" Reuben asked.

"No," Martha said, "how could we? Abby was tied to her home by the children, and grandma needed me here to the very end."

Patty caught Martha's eye to nod back cheerily, and say: "Oh, I shall take Aunt Martha visiting to mother one of these days, but I'm not ready to go myself quite yet. I think I love Portsea ever so much better than our little place out in Ohio, and I don't know what I shall ever do without a beach to walk

on I thought it was so queer when one of our neighbors came home from the East and brought mother a piece of seaweed as a present. I know what he meant now."

Well, you're a real New England girl, and we must keep you here," Reuben said. "Portsea's a dear old place, and a first rate one to hail from; but — I don't know but what a man might want to walk a little further, and stretch himself once in a while."

He stood up to go, and as his eye rested — as Abram's had done the night before — on the two women's faces, side by side, he said: "You two might be mother and daughter. Patty's just your very self, Martha."

"Martha lifted her eyes to the old glass opposite, where so many faces had been reflected. "I see the likeness. It's myself a great while ago."

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH HAND AND HEART.

And glance to glance, and hand to hand in greeting,
The past with all its fears,
Its silence and its tears
Shall vanish in the moment of that meeting.

THE waking on Monday morning was very wonderful to Martha. She opened her eyes with a feeling that she had been roused by some one saying, "Reuben has come. Wake and be happy!" No one had spoken, but Patty stood by the bedside smiling, and waiting to give her a kiss. For with Patty's visit had begun a new *régime*. Martha was no longer allowed to get up in the cold mornings and begin a day which was all too long for her strength. If she could say she would really much rather be up than in bed, then she might come down to a carefully warmed room; otherwise a little table was brought to her, and Patty sat inexorably down at the foot of the bed to make sure that breakfast was properly eaten

before her aunt attempted anything else. But to-day Patty gave permission at once, for there was no question of health in that answering smile; and she said to herself more than once, before the day was out, how sad it was to think that as people grew old they must suffer so much in the partings of life. If Aunt Martha could look so differently even in the thought of having an old friend back, what must it have been to be left living alone all these years? Some other reason for the change might have suggested itself to her if it were not that Dr. Perry himself, who had been watching over Martha with much solicitude of late, laid it all to returning health. Looking at her with a shrewd, pleasant smile, he said, "I have n't lived in Portsea so long without giving the folks a chance to find out how little I know. But really now, Martha, I think for old acquaintance sake you might have got well rather more slowly, just to give me a chance to say it was all my doing."

As he shook hands with her, he would have liked to count her pulse surreptitiously, to know if it quickened as her color rose. But he only said, "I'll let you alone as long as you're well-

behaved ; but mind I shall come whether I 'm wanted or not, if I see any of those tired looks again." And he walked away thinking that he should take the first chance of a talk with his old college friend, the great Dr. Williamson from the city, and see if he could tell him why Martha should have suddenly belied her own symptoms. A young girl generally regards the process of falling in love as being confined to a certain limit (unconsciously advancing that limit if she delays her own choice), so that Patty might not, under any circumstances, have associated the two facts of her aunt's returning look of vigor and Reuben's presence ; but, as it happened, he was not in Portsea to supply the link. He told them on Sunday afternoon that he had only come to make sure that they were all alive, and that he must go off again for three weeks or so on business. Then he should settle down for a regular visit. It was a blissful three weeks for Martha, and no wonder she throve under the quiet happiness, without even the agitation of his presence. She had only needed to look in Reuben's face to know that the man she had loved was as unchanged in

character as her own heart in its feeling for him ; the touch of his hand had told her the one thing more.

It was late one afternoon that she was coming home from some neighborly visit ; the day had been one of lingering Indian summer, and it was still warm enough to stroll slowly, watching the colors of the sunset, and feel all the pleasure of the time, when as she neared her home she looked, and there at the gate stood Reuben, waiting for her. He had been watching her face as she came toward him with an unconscious look of happiness ; and as it met his gaze there came into it something so effacing these years of separation that they met as they might have done if there had never been any good-bys said or written.

“You did n’t expect me ?” he said.

“I did n’t want to expect anything,” she answered ; “you were sure to come, — there was no more waiting.”

They went quietly in together. The sitting-room was vacant ; that, too, was unchanged, and Reuben stood looking at the ornaments on the mantle-piece : big branches of purple coral,

white and pink shells, and some gay tropical birds in a glass-case, — trophies of a sea-faring Symmes' uncle. He remembered the days when he had wondered whether it was possible that he should ever be let loose to see for himself what the world held outside of Portsea, when this little room seemed to him such a luxurious, dignified place after the bustle and untidiness and worry of his over-full home. He was seeing many things beside coral and shells when Martha, having laid aside shawl and bonnet, came to his side, and at the soft rustle of her presence he turned. With one hand in hers, the other on her shoulder, he held her a little back from him and said, "Martha, if I had come home and found you different, even if you'd made yourself happy some other way, I should have felt as if I'd judged for the best when I wrote you that letter. But it seems to me as if I'd lost something I never should catch up with, even ——" He stopped and hesitated, but the change in his look from the self-reliant man to the questioning lover told the rest. The doubt was answered in her face, and his hand no longer held her away, but drew her close to him.

"It had to be, Reuben, with all the rest of your troubles. We won't talk about what it was when I knew you couldn't come home. But I did have this comfort, — that I could see just why you thought it best."

"My comfort, if it was any, was to think that there was only the one thing to do, — give you up, and stick to my chance of work there. If I came home I'd no money to marry on. I knew that you could leave home less than ever, and there was mother. I couldn't have the heart to tie her down to work all her days. I knew well enough, Martha, — oh, I knew so well, dear, that it almost killed me to write it, — how you would feel when you got that letter. But I can tell you this: that I don't believe I should have had the courage to write it if I had n't thought then that there was very little chance of my coming home for even twice as long a time as I had been there already. I thought the same till a year ago; and do you know, Martha, that just at first I almost felt as if no good luck would make up for what we'd gone through. If I had come home, and found that I'd no right in your life any more——"

They were sitting now on the sofa ; the dusk was coming on. Within, the room would have been nearly dark but for the firelight, and without, the light in the West was changing from red to gold and gray. The last glow fell on her face as she turned toward Reuben, and said : " It makes me very happy to hear you say that. I used to think sometimes that it was n't the losing sight of you that was the worst ; it was losing the feeling that we owned so many things together, — things we'd both known all our lives. Oh, Reuben ! " — with a sudden clasping of the hand she held in both of hers — " that was one mournful consolation that I had, — to think that no new friend could ever know you quite as I had. Sometimes I felt as if I should always have the Reuben I loved for my own, whatever happened."

Life had made Martha a more reserved woman than was her nature, and but for the kindly twilight she would not have found it easy to own even as much as this to Reuben. But the ten years were bridged over in that sentence, and though it might be a little while yet before they should learn to know each in the other what

experience had taught them, the silence was broken, and all in good time even these years of separation would be shared.

"Tell me, Martha," he said, "how will you have our story told to mother? Shall I go straight to her with it, or will you come with me some day soon?"

"Would you mind, Reuben," she said, rather wistfully, "if we were to keep it quite to ourselves for a while? I feel as if it would be more like picking up some of the happiness we have lost, if I might have it to think about before any one else knows. I hope I'm not growing old, dear, that I should have to get used to being so happy."

Reuben's usually grave face looked back at her with a radiant smile. "Just what I should like best. Then we will have a peaceful time, and nobody to ask questions. But, Patty? — won't she ask why Mr. Reuben comes so often?"

"Dear child! no; she'll take it as a matter of course, — as much as she does Abram. They are great friends, and she will put you quite on the same footing, — except that she looks on you

as a great traveller. If she asks you all the questions she has planned, I shall only have to listen and hear all I want to know about your life."

"It would n't take long to tell all the pleasant part of it. Well, then, that's settled for a while at least. I don't think all the people can have died out in Portsea who used to know everybody else's business, so it won't be long before some one will have their eye on us. But till they do we'll take our comfort, Martha."

Martha's face looked as if it would be comfort "past all understanding." "But you don't think," she said, "that I am interfering with your mother's rights in not telling her? I would n't for the world do anything to put a worry into her happiness now."

"Oh, no, — that will be all right. She's as happy as she can well be; this will only be something to look forward to. Rest easy for once in your life, Martha, that you may do as you like without hurting any one else. Nothing could suit me better than to be let alone now till I know just what I'm to do. So dear, we'll make believe that I've never been away from

Portsea. I wonder if you remember that last walk we had on the beach?"

Remember it? Indeed she did,—so well that to think of it was to know how impossible it was for her to make believe that she was not a very different creature from the strong bright girl who had walked with him that night. But there was no more to be said; for there came voices outside, a quick run up the steps announcing Patty's return, and through the open doorway were heard the parting words of Abram Potter.

"Mind you tell your Aunt Marthy that them last turkeys is just cryin' out to be killed. I can come round to-morrow night's well's not and do it."

"Yes, I'll tell her. And you won't forget any of the things you promised to bring me from the city?"

"I dunno, Patty. I never could seem to remember more'n I could tell off on the fingers of one hand. Now, what *did* you say that other thumb stood for?"

"Why, worsted, Mr. Potter,—red worsted. And you must make your first thumb stand for

it, and never let it out of your sight. I must have it, because I'm going to knit a comforter to give to Mr. Reuben when he comes."

"Oh, I can't go fillin' up my wagon with worsted to be knit up for other folks. Guess I'll leave that extry thumb without nothin' to think about." And Abram went swinging down the road with a great haw, haw, and pleasing himself by thinking how he could bring Patty a surprise among her purchases. She turned to find Reuben waiting at the door for her, Martha lighting the lamp on the table in the sitting-room.

"Did you go and take your walk, Aunt Martha? I know you did, for you look so much better. She's not a bit strong, Mr. Reuben; and it's hard work to make her mind when I want her to take care of herself."

Reuben looked at Martha inquiringly; but there was no lack of color in her cheeks at that moment as he turned a scrutinizing gaze at her.

"Don't believe her, Reuben. There's nothing in the world the matter with me, but that I can afford to be lazy, now I've got Patty for housekeeper."

CHAPTER IX.

PLEASANT DAYS.

Joy comes, grief goes, we know not how ;
Everything is happy now.
'Tis the natural way of living.

— LOWELL.

WHATEVER troubles might pervade the rest of Portsea, there were two households that winter where Reuben Wilson's return had brought much rejoicing. That his mother should be grateful for the haven of rest into which her troubled life seemed to have floated was no wonder ; but she showed how well happiness agreed with her in the acceptance of her own share without too much interference with that of others. Whether it was from this peaceful content, or that Reuben's right to do as he liked had been established once for all, Mrs. Wilson never even tried to prevent him from coming and going as he liked in the Symmes home. Perhaps the two Marthas presented to her the extremes of safety, — the elder being at the age

often regarded as furnishing an invisible shield against any warmer feeling than friendship ; and, as for Patty, Mrs. Wilson would sooner have thought of her poor crippled Ben falling in love with her, when she came to read Nicholas Nickleby aloud to him, than that Reuben could have had any other feeling towards her but a paternal one.

It was a very disappointing evening if, early or late, Reuben did not appear in the sitting-room, which grew to be in his eyes far the brightest spot in his life ; bright on these winter evenings, not only with lamps and fire, but with the presence of the two women who were each in her generation such a type of sweet, pleasant goodness.

Martha had her own special seat in the corner by the fire, — an old-fashioned rocking-chair with a high back, having to her the strong association of being the one place in the house where she could remember seeing her mother ; one of those chance pictures left in a child's mind, like an instantaneous photograph of the present day. So there she established herself with lamp and work-basket on the little claw-footed table at her

side; stitching pleasant thoughts into her work, or watching what was going on at the larger table in the centre of the room. There sat Patty as busy with book and map and dictionary as she had been all day in helping Aunt Martha, and doing a pleasant turn for any one who came in her path. If the plan for helping her father in his school — the plan talked over ever since Patty was old enough to share his confidence — did not seem to her quite the ideal that it used to be, still “father’s” wishes were as sacred as ever, and she quite as determined to go through the work he had wished her to accomplish during the winter.

“Keep school!” Abram said, when he heard the plan. “Sakes alive! to think I’ve been talking to a futur’ schoolmarm, and treated her just as if she was common folks. They’ve improved on the article since our day, Marthy.” But Patty was very serious. No difficulties were to stand in the way if she could be of use to the dear, good father who had given her this winter of vacation before settling down to life. Reuben Wilson’s arrival made no difference in her work, except that it was disposed of rather

earlier, in order that the puzzling over sums and committing long stretches of grammar to memory might be done with before the hour when he was likely to look in upon them. Then there would be an interchange of instruction. The missing fraction in some imaginary business transaction would be hunted up by Reuben, and in return Patty would give him some unmethodical but very useful lessons in German, — that having been the language of half her companions since she had been transplanted to the West. In this way, and with the chance of many a happy walk and talk for Reuben and Martha, the winter went, bringing quiet happiness to all concerned, though nothing that could be called an event worth telling. Nothing new was likely to happen in this little community so off the highway of life; but it is of elements old as the days of mythology that the stories of all our lives are made, and such were at work here.

Abram Potter, though a slow worker, was a persistent one, and his mind moved as slowly as his limbs. As the winter passed one idea took possession of him, and the most surprising thing about it was that he doubted if this

thought had occurred to any one of the people most interested. "An idee's got to be uncommon sharp to get through my head, and when it's there it doos n't seem as if I could help holdin' on to it." It was the working of an "idee" of this penetrating kind which caused him to sit of an evening making the most wonderful faces at the back-log, till Martha began to wonder whether any hidden sorrow connected with cows or crops could be resting on his mind. Left to himself, it is not at all probable that the good soul would ever have looked beyond the fair seeming happiness of his friends. He had certainly thought that some change would have followed Reuben's return; but as nothing transpired he did not even get so far as to wonder, but remained satisfied with the certainty that two such people as Reuben Wilson and Martha Symmes were sure to be right, whatever they did. But one day he met the Widow Briggs, who stopped him in the road with, "An' how do you think Marthy Symmes is lookin'?"

"Fus' rate," Abram said, with the air of being prepared to do battle for every feature in his friend's face.

"I dunno ; but there 's somethin' in her looks I don't like."

"You must be hard to please, then," he answered, eyeing her very much as if he would like to run her down with the wheelbarrow she had made him drop.

"It ain't that," Mrs. Briggs said ; "Marthy's good and pretty, too. I don't find no fault with her for not being good looking enough. But I can't look at her without thinkin' how her ma went off in a waste ——"

Abram sniffed, "My father killed himself tumblin' off a hay-cart before I was born ; I dunno as I feel any great call to worry about myself when hayin' time comes round."

"—— an' her sister," Mrs. Briggs went on, ignoring this superficial view of heredity. "I set between 'em at school, an' prettier girls you wouldn't wish to see. Just such a pink and white complect as Marthy used to have,—— though she ain't got it now, poor dear. There ain't a worse sign than that."

"Wull, if pretty pink cheeks is a bad sign I guess I know a good many as'd run the resk of any harm comin' from 'em. Hows'ever, what

I'd like to know is, what in time you think's the matter with Marthy. She seems to em just's well's ever she was, only maybe she ain't quite so lively as she used to be. That's no more'n to be expected, for she's had a good deal to try her one way an' 'nother — Marthy has."

"I dunno as anythin's the matter now. I can't help thinkin' when I see her lookin' white, how her mother's folks have got snuffed right out while you was lookin' at 'em, as you may say. I do think Marthy's a good deal to try her, with all the goings on of that flyaway niece o' her'n. I must say I don't think so much o' Patty Gardiner as I expected to do of Abby's daughter."

"I ain't got nothin' to say agen Mis' Gardiner — have n't seen her these ten years ; but I call it to any woman's credit to fetch up a girl the way she's done her daughter. If you think you can improve the pattern, Mis' Briggs, I just wish you'd try it on some o' the girls round here — that's all.

Abram showed signs of proceeding on his way, but she had not finished her say ; and the

Ancient Mariner did not make a more persistent stand than the Widow Briggs when she had something disagreeable to communicate.

"Well there, you need n't flare up, Abram Potter. 'Tain't a cryin' sin to say a girl's a fly-away. I guess you'd know whether she was or not if she had red hair an' a homely mouth."

"She would n't have a chance to fly very high in that case," growled Abram.

"Would n't have a chance to be town talk, nuther. But there's no use talkin' to men ——"

"No use at all, marm, where a pretty woman's consarned," Abram said, looking quite restored to good humor by having the chance to administer this parting poke, and beginning to gather up his tools, when he was arrested by the widow's saying, "I did think, as an old friend of Marthy's, you'd ha' felt a little more sympathy with her. I call it hard to have Patty come on to keep her company, an' then spend all her time goin' round with Reuben Wilson, an' he most old enough to be her father."

"What!" roared Abram, and the widow quite staggered in the gust she had raised. "Why, they'll say next I want to marry Marthy an'

Patty, both of 'em, 'cause I see 'em home from meetin'."

Mrs. Briggs bowed her head meekly under his wrath. "It's a very different matter with you. You have n't just got home with lots of money an' foreign ways. But I'm sure I don't want to put you out. I only just thought I'd tell you how folks talks, an' as you're there so much, you might just give Marthy a hint."

"My hints are the kind that gen'rally knocks folks down. I guess I'll save 'em till I find the fools that could talk such everlastin' nonsense."

"Well," snapped out Mrs. Briggs, "I ain't the keeper o' your conscience, Abram Potter."

"My conscience ain't much to look at, marm; but sech as it is, I think I can manage to keep an eye to it myself."

"Your notions of what's doo to a friend is different from mine ——"

"I think likely they be," interpolated Abram.

"—— but if I was in your place I should step in and mention to Marthy that I did n't think she was givin' Patty anythin' like the trainin' she got herself from her poor grandma."

"If you was in my place you'd know that

Patty bids fair to be just such another as her Aunt Marthy. And you'd know, too," Abram said, rising in his wrath and keeping a firm hold of his shovel, as if it might be endowed with a sympathy in his feelings quite unsafe for Mrs. Briggs,—"you'd know that to give a hint of such a thing to any one of them three people would be a burnin' sin an' shame—so there!"

Trusting himself no further, Abram and his wheelbarrow disappeared down the road, leaving Mrs. Briggs for once speechless, till she gave vent to a prolonged, "Well, I never!" but went her way with this piece of mischief left useless on her hands. After this, even Mrs. Briggs would not have dared to make her suggestions in the hearing of Martha or Patty; and as Martha herself mingled far less in the Portsea gatherings than in her earlier days, neither word nor look ever told her that any one was interesting themselves about her affairs. The only question that came to Reuben's mind was of tiding over the next few years for himself and Martha. When he returned home, it was with the full intention of asking her to share his lot wherever it might be cast. Now that he saw

her daily, he felt, not anxiety for her health if only she might continue her present life, but much solicitude as to the effect of transplanting her to one of even more care than she had had in her young, strong days. More and more he was growing to think that the task he had set himself ten years ago having been finished, and his mother's life made easy, the only question now to be decided was between love and ambition. Since he had found the possibility of accomplishing so much by force of will, there had come to him visions of what money might do in his native place. It was all distinct in his plans, might almost be written down on paper, the changes that should come, the buildings that would rise. But all this could only be carried out at the expense of his happiness—more than that, the happiness of the woman who had waited for him all these years. It was no wonder if his face was more grave than in the first days of his return, or that Martha seeing it so found that she was learning still one more lesson of life,—to sympathize in silence when words would have been such an inexpressible relief. Of the four people whose lives go to the

telling of my story, Patty was the only one who enjoyed her life without a question. She was happier than she had ever been before ; and why should she not be, with such a companion as Aunt Martha, and all the rest of her small world so kind and pleasant ?

CHAPTER X.

NEW YEAR'S EVE.

New year coming on apace,
What have you to give me?
Bring you scathe, or bring you grace,
Face me with an honest face,
You shall not deceive me.

—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

THE last afternoon of the old year had come. It had been an unusually cold month even for December, and Martha had been housed so much that for her knowledge of what was going on outside she was dependent on Patty, who was as much at home now in Portsea as if she had never left it.

“Aunt Martha, do you know I think I’ve found out a secret?”

Martha looked up in great surprise from her occupation of arranging the contents of a drawer in the handsome old bureau and secretary combined, which was one of the chief ornaments of the sitting-room.

"Things do not stay secrets very long in Portsea. Who told you, dear?"

"Why, nobody told me," Patty said, putting down her book, in which she had been apparently engrossed. "I don't even know how I found out. Abram Potter says he feels things in his bones; perhaps that is the way this was revealed to me. It does not seem a very romantic way to find out a love story."

"What in the world are you talking about, child? Is it your book? I thought you were buried alive in it, you have been so still."

Patty came to sit on a cricket by Martha's side, and began to turn over the ribbons in a box which lay on her aunt's lap. "It was what I was reading that made me think of it; but it is not in the book. A real love story, Aunt Martha, and going on in Portsea. What do you think of that?"

For an instant it flashed through Martha's mind that Patty had found out the relation existing between Reuben and herself. But no; she would never have asked the question with that straightforward, easy look; would never have asked it at all, even if she had guessed,

which was unlikely in itself. So Martha only smiled back and waited to hear.

"It is n't anything very exciting, except that seeing people who love each other always is interesting ;—don't you think so?"

It did not seem to be a question needing a very vital answer, so Martha waited to hear more. Patty seemed to find a good deal of difficulty with her questions, impersonal as they were, and went on examining the various trifles ; tying a ribbon into a bow, and trying it on herself, then on her aunt, with a critical air.

Presently — "Aunt Martha," she said, "I suppose you've known things of that sort happen, have n't you? People must as they grow older."

Then with a sudden impulse, or perhaps because she had fancied a meaning in Martha's half-sad little smile and lifting of the eyebrows : "No, I don't mean that you are old, dear ; you're prettier now than anybody else ; but then you are just the sort of person that any one would tell such a story to."

"You're very vague, Patty dear, but I suppose I do know what you mean. No, I think

the girls I've known must have fallen in love very quietly ; at least no one ever asked me to help them through, that I can remember. But what 's your secret ? You seem to have more to tell than I have."

"It does n't sound very interesting after the Pirate. Is n't it queer to think that Sarah Green has just the same feeling about that awkward Joe Wyman that Minna Troil had for Cleveland ?"

Martha could not help laughing at the jumble of personages, and Patty joined. "I don't wonder you laugh, Aunt Martha, but really I have been watching those two at singing-school, and at one place and another, and I feel as if I knew all about them."

Then Patty told of the various ins and outs of the little love story as she had seen it, and how it had interested her. "And do you know," she said, "I was wondering just now if we might not give Sarah a little pleasure in one way. You know the Greens really have not quite money enough to keep body and soul together, and as for looking nice it goes to my heart to see that pretty girl wearing things that

I should n't think good enough to make into pincushions. It's all the worse, because Joe's sisters can afford to put a whole rooster's tail on their bonnets if they like, and they do give such looks at poor Sarah's old brown straw with a dyed ribbon. Don't you think it would be delightful if we could trim up something for her, and let Joe see for once how pretty she is? Why, perhaps it might settle his mind right off, and he would take her in spite of his sisters."

No more congenial occupation could have been found for Martha than doing her best to help on some one else's happiness, and it did not require Patty's coaxing kiss to enlist her at once. A very nice bonnet of Patty's was condemned, that it might be made prettier before it was passed over to Sarah Green. Martha turned over her tidy drawer again to find the suitable materials among remnants laid away, as people must needs do to whom a visit to a shop is an excursion and not a daily event. Would not this pretty red and black plaid ribbon be just the thing for Sarah Green's dark complexion? Smoothing it with her hand, she could not help thinking of the days when it was new; and the

bonnet it trimmed had been quite an event in her life, it was so becoming. She had always been fond of that particular bonnet, because she had worn it for the first time at church on a Sunday when Reuben had left some one else to walk home with her, and she was sure it was the bonnet that decided him. She handled the ribbon quite tenderly, and felt half sorry to part with the last bit of anything so happily associated.

Martha was unconsciously smiling to herself over her fancies, when it came into her mind how curious it was that of two people loving each other as she and Patty did, one should be absolutely unconscious of what was passing in a heart so open on all subjects but this. With a feeling as if she were almost insincere to the girl who stood quietly by her, Martha turned to give expression to the feeling in her mind by a loving word, when looking up at Patty she was surprised at the expression in her face. From Martha's seat she was just out of the line for seeing any one approaching the house ; but Patty, who faced the window, was looking out with lips apart, and such an expression of delighted sur-

prise that it needed no question to know that whatever she saw was a joyfully welcomed sight.

"Mr. Reuben ! and he said that he should not be back till to-morrow ; and oh, Aunt Martha, he has brought skates to give me the lesson he promised me !" And at that moment Reuben came through the gate and up the steps swinging some skates in his hand, and smiling up at Patty, who stood a picture of happy greeting.

There are efforts of memory when one feels as if trying to touch a phantom ; — one instant more, and we shall have it all clear in our minds, and then the clue has slipped from us. Patty moved and the clue was lost, and Martha was not sure in the next moment what Patty's face had suggested to her, though the look she had seen there was new and strange. It was all quickly arranged. Reuben had been gone for a week, but had returned unexpectedly, and hearing of wonderful black ice not far away, had come to keep his promise to Patty. Martha had nothing to ask for in the hearty wishes that she could go with them, but it was not to be thought of ; and with many charges to Reuben they departed, Patty flying back for a last kiss, and

looking so pretty and happy that Martha held her off for a moment to keep the picture in her mind. . And what a glorified afternoon it was to Patty! The blue sky above her might have been the opening to heaven, while the earth shone beneath her feet!

"How lovely it is to live where the winter is just as delightful as the summer," she said.

"Wait till June," Reuben said, looking down at her. Her face seemed so the ideal of the happy beginning of life that a sudden sense of maturity came to him, with a real regret for his own youth.

"Wait! I should n't care how long I waited if it's all as delicious as this, and it can't be better."

"Perhaps you'll wish the time away fast enough when March mud comes. I don't know that I want you to be so much happier than all the rest of us."

"Dear me! I should n't like to think that," Patty said, with a little grave look coming across her forehead. "Of course I know that I'm not going to be looked after all my days. I shall take care of them at home, and of Aunt Martha,

too, instead of their doing it for me. I like taking care. You don't think it's necessary to be gloomy? You don't feel so, do you?"

"Oh no, it is n't necessary, and I daresay you'll take life easy. Only you know that when you're the one to do the looking out you'll be apt to be thinking of that in the midst of the best time you can have."

"Well, I'm sorry, that's all. I should like to think you were enjoying this afternoon as much as I do."

"Don't worry about that," Reuben said. "I ought to enjoy such a day as this; I've wished for it often enough in the last ten winters."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that, for somebody said at our house yesterday they believed you were homesick after California."

Reuben swung his bundle of skates with an emphasis: "There's one thing you must make up your mind to in this world, Patty: whether you take it easy or hard, you've got to meet a fool at every turn, and keep your patience with every one of them. That's the way my poor mother's kept in a worry, with people coming in to ask her when I'm going, and where

I'm going, and forty other things they've no business with."

"You do want to stay here, then? I'm glad of that."

"Want to stay! I want to do that more than anything else in this world, except a heap of other things that all depend on this one wish. I'll tell you what's the hard part of life, according to my notion. It's the finding out what you ought to do, not the doing of it. When your duty stands staring you straight in the face, all you've got to do is to go at it."

Patty looked quite awed. "I don't believe I could. Of course there are lots of things I ought to do, but they're such little bits of duties,—staying at home when mother wants me, or keeping my temper with the children; things I should be ashamed to live in the house with if I did n't do them. But I suppose a man's got to settle whether he'll be brave and honest, and ever so many things a woman need n't think about at all."

"Indeed, she must think about them all, Patty. She must think for her husband if she does n't for herself." This way of enforcing his remark

silenced her, and she walked on without an answer. "Yes, Patty, that's regular woman's work, — keeping your temper and never saying wrong's right for anybody. I know I should have been a very different man these years back, if it had n't been for thinking of such women at home as my mother," and, with an instant's pause, "your Aunt Martha."

Patty was glad to have something said calling forth a safe remark. "You said you remembered me when I was a little girl, and do you know I almost feel as if I had known you very well then, — Aunt Martha has told me so many stories about you."

"No one knew me any better than she did ; I don't remember when we did n't know each other. I'm glad she talks about the old times to you."

"She talked a great deal about them when I first came, it was so long since she had seen me. You don't know how fond I am of Portsea, and then it's so pleasant to think of Aunt Martha always living in that house and being ready for mother or any of us children to come there."

"Why, you seem to have settled Martha's life

for her. I dare say she does n't feel as if that was going to be the only home she 'll ever have."

"Indeed, she does," Patty said, very decidedly. "She said once that she could not imagine herself anywhere else, and I've planned it all out how we shall take turns to come and be with her." As he did not speak, Patty went on, "Do you know I don't think Aunt Martha seems like other people; she's more like a person in a book to me. And she's been doing for other people so long that I feel as if I should like to put her in cotton wool and take care of her. She says she was like me when she was a girl, and always having a nice time. I hate to think that everything must change when anybody is growing old."

"And I suppose we all do seem rather old folks to you, Patty?"

She laughed and colored. "Oh no, — *you* don't." Then her emphasis on the "you" struck her with some embarrassment. "I suppose it's because Aunt Martha herself feels that she's settled down for life — and you — why, you're moving about, and I suppose you want to do a

great many more things. It is different, you know." She looked puzzled and very pretty as she stopped, hoping he would help her out.

"I suppose, then, if I stopped roaming, and only wanted to do one thing very much, I should not seem old to you? Do I seem as old as Abram Potter, for instance?"

"Dear old Abram! Why, he's a hundred. No, you don't seem as old as he does. But you need n't ask me to say that you begin to be as delightful," she said, looking up with a smile.

"You don't comfort my vanity much, Patty. We all think Abram's the best fellow that ever was, but I think we've had a way of laughing at him, all the same."

"You'll laugh at me, too, when I say that he seems to me like one of the people who could do something worth telling about, for all he looks so queer — something splendid, I mean — like saving a life, or giving up his money, or a woman he cared for."

"She spoke with such enthusiasm that Reuben answered with energy: "You're right, Patty, I do believe. It takes a woman to find out such things. Martha says he's been a great

deal to her since she's been so lonely." Then, with a pondering tone to himself, "Why, I wonder if he's been fond of her all this time."

"Do you know," Patty said, "that is an idea that I've had. It never seems as if he could do enough for Aunt Martha, and it would be just like him to take that way of showing how much he cared for her. I don't believe he would ever make up his mind to tell her so."

Reuben's lips went together rather tightly. "I should think not, indeed." Then laughing, "Why, you're a wonderful young woman, Patty; you have had your eye on all of us."

She had half a mind to tell him the love-story she had been talking over with her aunt, and he was thinking that of course such an observing little person could not have been blind to the relations between Martha and himself. Their eyes met: in hers was a look of pretty consciousness of where her thoughts were tending, and no wonder if she put a different interpretation from the true one on the earnest expression with which he returned it. A winning little creature in herself, Patty had from the first a claim on his heart from her resem-

blance to the love of his boyish days. Martha's delicate face was all the dearer that it had changed from its fresher beauty through these years of faithful waiting for him ; as the wedding ring becomes worn and frail, though still keeping the form of that far-off day when it first began to be a part of the girl's life. The words were almost on his lips to tell her his story, and ask for the sympathy he felt so certain of having, when they reached the end of the walk. But she had seen a look in his face it had never had before, and it was happiness for that moment ; she wanted no words.

Patty took her lesson with very unexpected courage when she found there was no fear of a fall with that strong arm always ready ; and if Reuben had been as young as he felt that afternoon they would have been a very fairly-matched pair. With the teaching and the hilarity over Patty's improvement under his lessons, it was no wonder if her afternoon spun along without a recollection that it must come to an end. I am afraid Aunt Martha might have sat waiting for her at home still longer if Patty's ankles had not refused to take her for another sweep

along the smooth ice. The sun had gone, but behind them the hill stood black against the crimsoning sky; across the marshes the moon was climbing up over the sea, and as they stood together in the perfect stillness they could hear the heavy pound of the breakers on the beach. The resting was but a moment. As soon as the excitement was over, Patty's heart smote her for forgetting that there was some one who might be anxious.

"Dear me! Why, we shall walk home in the moonlight. I had n't a thought of it's being so late, — but what a lovely time I've had!"

"An afternoon to remember," Reuben said, "though we'll have some more like it, if only another snow-storm does n't cover up the ice; it was just luck that the creek had not frozen before the last snow. Now sit down on this stone, and I'll take off your skates. You won't feel frightened the next time you put them on."

A world of trifles go to make up a happy time at Patty's age and in her frame of mind, — the sharing of that exhilarating motion through the air, and now the gentle care-taking with skate-straps and shawl.

"I'll wrap you up well, and then you must step out. I have it on my shoulders that you're not to take cold."

"Yes, I must hurry really. Now I've had my fun my conscience begins to work, and I want to get back to Aunt Martha." As they passed through some bars out on to the road, Patty turned to look back. "I feel like saying good-by to the creek, it's given me such pleasure. I daresay we shall come back again, but maybe not, and then I've had this afternoon; and oh," with a long breath, "I've enjoyed it so much. It will be one thing more to tell them at home."

"You're not going yet. We shall have all that there is of the ice for this winter, — that is to say, if I'm here."

He was putting up the bars, and not till the last one was in place did he turn to Patty, and then it was impossible for him not to be struck by the blank look in her face. It was something more than surprise; a little quick drawing of her breath, and pressing the teeth on her under lip, as a child might have done; then she said, "If you are here? Why, where else should you be?"

"Nowhere else if I may be where I wish ; but then," with a long breath, "that does n't seem to be my lot. Come, Patty, I really must n't let you stand here in the cold. There's no need to look a good-by to the ice this minute, whatever comes."

He picked up the skates, slung them over his shoulder, and put out his hand for hers, to lead her down a slippery bit of the road. "What hard lines it is on a fellow," he was saying to himself, "that his luck should carry him off from a place where he's got so many people to care for." And as he thought this he unconsciously held her hand more firmly in his, and when they came to easy walking again and he dropped it from his clasp, looked at her with what Patty thought the kindest smile she had ever seen on any face. They walked on side by side, but silently. Patty's exhilaration had suddenly left her, and she did not like to question Reuben, who was so evidently thinking deeply, and with bent head apparently did not notice her. So Patty thought ; but still, he might look up presently, and she bravely winked away her tears, for which she felt much ashamed.

"Patty," Reuben said presently, with such a deliberate manner that it helped her to steady herself, "Patty, I did n't mean to have bothered you with a secret ; I hate to keep one myself. What I said just now slipped out without my thinking. I don't want my mother to be worried till I know just what I am going to do. I thought I did till a day or two ago. Everything was settled to my mind, and I'd written to Hosea Martin ; then comes a letter from him just crossing mine, and there I am all afloat again. I think it will come out all right ; but I can't be sure for another month, or maybe longer. I can stand waiting a great deal better if I don't have to talk about it, —so will you please not to say a word to your Aunt Martha about it. She would mind next to mother."

"It's very little you know who would mind most," Patty said to herself, while he by her side was again wondering whether he might tell her what Martha was to him. But no : it had been Martha's own wish that no one should know, and if she had wished to take Patty into her confidence she would have done so herself. "Then, Patty, we'll have our secret together, —

just you and I. We'll make the most of the skating, and I shall trust to everything coming out right." And it was said so kindly, really as if he cared, Patty thought, that her desire to cry was driven away. The sober walk home was very different from the starting out. Both were silent, — Reuben meditating over his plans, and Patty feeling as if the afternoon had been a revelation to her of herself. To find what the possibility of Reuben's departure was to her told her as well what it would be to carry out the plans which she knew were looked upon as a certainty at home. Whichever way she looked it seemed as if she saw the end of this winter's happiness. If she could only pour out all her troubles to Aunt Martha — but this was not to be thought of. Mr. Reuben had given her a secret to keep, and keep it she would; it had this comfort, that it was something in common with him.

Early in the day Patty had had an idea of coaxing Aunt Martha to watch out the old year with her; but when their usual bed-hour came she made no remonstrance, and while the fastening of doors and window-shutters went on,

sat on a low seat, looking into the fire. Presently Martha came back to her chair, and for some moments neither spoke.

"Maybe sometime you've sat on this same cricket looking into the fire, Aunt Martha?"

"I think not, dear. That was your own; it came over here with some other things, when your father moved West."

"I did n't know but what you might have sat just here when you were a girl, wondering about the New Year."

"Girls are a good deal alike — or I think you are like what I was; so I've no doubt I did my share of wondering, even if it was n't on that cricket."

Sitting silent again Patty could not but feel the weight at her heart grow heavier. They two, so much alike, — Aunt Martha owing to having wondered what the years might bring to her, and now sitting here alone — alone but for Patty herself, who could have cried out in terror at the prospect of such solitude.

"Well, the old year has brought me a good deal. Father never was so well as he's been this year, and we've paid up the mortgage on

the house, and I've had my visit to Portsea." Then with a sudden impulse she left her seat and knelt by Martha's side, her arms resting on her aunt's knees, and looking up at her she said, "You don't think me very ungrateful to feel so about leaving here and going back to them at home?"

"If you are, then I'm very selfish to feel as sorry as I shall be to let you go. We do love each other dearly, don't we, Patty?"

"I don't know how it is, Aunt Martha, but I feel all wrong to-night. I've got just what I've been wishing for; I've had my visit here, and now I'm going home to help father. He and I've planned it ever since I was a little bit of a girl. What would he say if he knew I didn't want to go back to him?" Her voice broke. It was such a comfort to have something definite to cry for, that she quite longed to be scolded and told that she was silly.

"Your father's one who knows feelings ain't made to order. He wouldn't wonder that Portsea seems like another home to you."

"But, Aunt Martha, you don't know how horrid I am. I don't want to go back to the

school; I've had a beautiful time here, and I can't bear not to have it keep on. I hate myself for feeling so, but I can't feel any different."

"I think sometimes, dear, we waste time and sorrow in repenting for our feelings. You think it's wrong, and you don't mean to feel so if you can help it. Just settle it that you'd do something beside keep school if you could; but if you can't, you'll do as well as you know how. I guess, if you act right, you can let your feelings take care of themselves."

Patty nestled her head closer, and put her arms round Martha's neck. "Oh, you're so comforting, Aunt Martha; you don't think I ought to despise myself, then?"

"You'd better not think about yourself at all. Tell father just how you feel when you go home; he'll be pleased to have you talk to him, and he'll know how to help you. There's nothing so uncomfortable to live with as somebody who won't be helped."

"And you *will* send for me to come and make you a visit sometimes? You know, if I am earning money, I can treat myself to a journey once in a while."

"Just as soon as your vacation begins I'll write to say I can't live another minute without you."

"You've done me so much good, you can't think," Patty said, with another hug; and, slipping down on to the rug again, sat holding her knees with her hands, her head resting against Martha's lap.

"Aunt Martha," she said, presently, "do you know if everything went smoothly with mother and father before they were married?" And as Martha, lost in astonishment, did not answer directly, Patty went on, "I mean, did they begin to care about each other, and then go on without misunderstanding or trouble?"

"Why, my dear child, I shall have to rub up my memory. It's so long ago that I don't seem to remember the time when they didn't love each other. You see your father's people all lived here then; Seth and Abby had always been together, and I don't believe they ever thought of caring for any one else. I'm a good deal younger than Abby, but I know that your father has seemed like my brother all my days."

"It must be very pleasant not to have any

worry or doubt," Patty said with a sigh, and then a little laugh. "I hope you won't think my mind runs on love stories. This is the second time to-day I've talked to you about one. But I happened to be thinking about poor Sarah Green and her troubles; and then in stories, you know, people are always so unhappy at first."

"There would be very few stories to write if every one had as easy a time with their love matters as your mother had."

"And you don't think it is so generally?"

"I believe when I was a girl that I used to think everybody loved and married their husbands just as peaceably as my sister Abby did. I have learned to know better than that." If it had not been for the uneasy, flickering light she had thrown on Patty's feelings, Martha might have indulged herself in a romantic talk, so dear to women as they sit over the fire together. "There's a deal of patience needed in this world, Patty dear; sometimes people have to wait for happiness what seems a long time."

"Oh, and if it does n't come after all" — with a long, quivering sigh.

"Darling, it is n't always the first thing we ask

for that comes to us. I know it's hard doctrine to preach to you, when you're just beginning; but I don't think it's often that we can't make our happiness much more than we know."

"I'll do my best when I'm back at Carthage; but oh, Aunt Martha, I shall be homesick for you all the time."

They parted with a loving good-night and happy New Year, but it was Martha who heard the last stroke of the old year from the tall clock down stairs as she lay pondering this day's discovery. She remembered Reuben telling her that she surely might do as she liked in keeping her secret, and she could only trust that the harm done to Patty's happiness was not serious. How could that be happiness to Martha which brought sorrow to her dear namesake?

CHAPTER XI.

A MESSAGE BROUGHT.

Our Lord God is like a printer, who sets the letters backwards, so that we cannot read them. When we are printed off yonder in the life to come, we shall read, all clear and straightforward.

WHATEVER another winter might bring, Patty's farewell to the skating-ground was a final one for this year. The creek lay buried deep under another fall of snow, and Patty had no thought to give to the spoiling of her plans; for Aunt Martha was ill, and needing her care. It was not an unhappy time. She and Aunt Martha were always together, and with no very great anxiety; for the doctor had said the attack of pleurisy was not a severe one, and did not add that, for that very reason, he felt a fear lest there were some other cause for her utter loss of strength.

It was the end of February before Martha came back to her place in the sitting-room one beautiful Sunday afternoon. "Patty," she had said the evening before, "if you see Reuben at church to-morrow, I wish you would tell him that

I'm well enough to see him now, and, perhaps, he will come here in the afternoon; and, Patty, I don't feel quite up to much talking, so I think, dear, I should like to see him alone."

"Yes, indeed, I'll keep watch up-stairs. You're sure there's no harm in your talking,—Dr. Perry has said so much to me about quiet."

"No; the doctor himself gave me leave."

It was a lovely mild afternoon, such as comes in the late winter, when the shadows lie long across the snow. The under-side of the drifts look a deep blue as one turns from the bright sky, and almost a summer haze lies between you and the sun. Martha sat in the great chintz-covered arm-chair, watching for Reuben as he should come by the road that led toward the church. How she wished that she could pass over that slope which hid from her the beach, where she knew the breakers were rolling in this afternoon with the mists of spray shining in the sun. She caught her breath and closed her eyes, as there came to her a memory and a longing almost too great to bear just now.

When she opened them again Reuben was in sight; a few moments more and he was sitting

by her, but at first with no words beyond his greeting. Martha spoke first, and said, with a smile: "Reuben, your face is as honest as a looking-glass. I'm afraid that Patty did not tell you what a thin, pale body you were going to see."

He could not help what his looks might tell, and he found it as hard to choose his words; something rose in his throat and choked them back, and he could only smooth the hand he held in his. His voice was not quite natural when he said: "Of course you look differently to me from what you do to any one who's been with you all the time. Why, it's nearly two months; but you'll gain every day now."

"Seven weeks last Friday. And, Reuben, I've been wanting to see you very much lately; now I've got you here it's hard work to say what I want."

"Then, don't say anything, dear. Let me do the talking; I've a deal to tell you about my plans."

"That's it, Reuben? They're not my plans; not ours, I mean. Don't you see that I never shall be able to help you carry them out."

He bent his head and pressed the white, thin hand against his lips: "You don't mean *never*, Martha. Don't say that; I know you're ill now, but you and I have learned to wait."

"I've waited to have what I wanted most in the world given to me. I never imagined in all these ten years anything happier than this winter has been. Often and often I've thought that if you came back you might be changed, or you'd think that I was, so that I should see it when you looked at me. Yes dear," in answer to his caress and half-spoken words, "you've been everything to me; that was one thing I wanted to say to you. There's something else that's harder to say."

"Whatever else there is must be put off, then, my dear. You must let me have my say, Martha, and it's just this: Ten years are enough to give out of our lives; I can't afford any more. I made up my mind before I saw you to-day; and now, Martha, it seems as if any time would be too long to wait before you'll let me be the one who's the most right to nurse you."

She looked so white, though her lips still smiled, that he stooped to hold her with his arm

while he reached for the glass of water she signed to him to give her.

"Kneel there before me, Reuben, while I tell you what I knew only yesterday. At first I thought I'd write it to you. My dear, we did everything for the best; but I shall never be your wife now."

He did not speak, but kneeling there held her as if he could save her from the danger she feared to put in words. "There's only a little time left me, the doctor thinks. If you must go away, it can't be as hard to part as it was; but I thought if you knew, dear, you would put it off as long as you could."

"And I had come to tell you that I need n't leave you, or you leave home. Yes, everything has been settled since you've been taken sick, and I thank the Lord for it; whatever time is left, Martha, belongs to me."

Her face frightened him, but gave him all the more reason for perfect calm, and the look passed away from her as she saw his pleasant smile. "One kiss, Martha, to say that you leave everything to me. Minding always used to come easy to you, and I don't think you'll begin

to set up your will now." He stood beside her chair, and when he said : "See, now ; you look like a different creature just as soon as you make up your mind to do what I wish." She smiled back again, so like herself that he began to lose his chilling fear.

"Only one thing more, Reuben : I would like to tell Patty myself, and I want her to know first of all. Come to-morrow again ; then you'll see how obedient I can be."

Patty came down at the closing of the door to find Martha leaning back in her chair, but with such a tranquil face that it was evident the visit had done her no harm. Patty brought into the room with her the only care that seemed left to Martha, now that Reuben had decided for her. To-night she would speak, and she thought she could tell the story of her own long waiting for happiness, so that Patty's sympathy with her should be a veil over what she hoped and believed was only the beginning of a feeling in the girl's heart. Patty's reading of some peaceful Sunday-book was interrupted by a step at the door.

"It's Abram Potter ; I'll go and speak to

him, Aunt Martha. He has only come to ask about you."

"Bring him in, dear. It won't do me the least harm to see him for a little while. I know he'll be glad to find me down-stairs."

Very glad, and very shy, and under much restraint from his Sunday clothes was Abram. Illness seemed to invest his old friend with something so new and strange to him that it was Martha who had to make the advances which should bring him back to his comical, comfortable self. Patty felt almost vexed with him for looking so scared, and wished she had not let him come in to show Aunt Martha how changed he thought her. Changed she was, — that he expected ; but it was something else, — a loss of the look as if she belonged to everyday life, that made it hard for him to take up his familiar ways with her.

"Does n't she look prettier than ever?" Patty said, stroking Martha's hair, and wrapping her shawl about her with loving ways. "I don't mind flattering her, because you see it's all my doing. I made this cap myself ; I saw one like it in the city the day I went there, and I brought

it home in my mind. Is n't it just the thing for her? And this white shawl mother knit for her last summer to send by me. Did you know that mother is coming soon for a visit? Father and the boys are going to grandmother's, and mother can stay a month before she takes me home."

Martha's pleased smile and Patty's cheery ways had their effect, and Abram found himself very soon discussing the plans for planting the garden in the spring quite at his ease. He had come in, he said, to see if Patty would n't like to go up to the church this evening; he would see her safe home.

"There's a Sabbath-school concert, an' as you was n't there last month, I thought maybe you'd like to go to-night. That lame boy of Mis' Wilson's is goin' to sing, an' I tell you it's just lovely. I dunno how it is, whether it's thinkin' about his poor little hump-back, or whether it's a pretty mournful way he has with his voice—but there, I felt as if I should like to go off by myself and have a good cry about nothin' at all when I listened to him."

Mr. Reuben had told her, Patty said, how

happy Ben was to have a place in the choir, and how it pleased his mother to hear him praised. Of course, Martha would hear of no reason why she should not go. Nora would be there to do anything she needed, and she should enjoy hearing all about it from Patty when she came home. Martha was to have tea down-stairs, and Patty insisted that Abram should stay, and she would set the table there in the sitting-room, and they would have a party in honor of this evening. A very happy occasion it was, — Patty going between kitchen and sitting-room, and with Abram's good-natured, clumsy help, and many laughs, putting a very hospitable-looking tea-table before Martha, as she sat in her own corner by the fire. "A regular Thanksgiving tea," Abram said, as he drew his chair near Martha's for a few minutes' talk before he said good-by.

"The world seems to be goin' all right again, now we've got you back in it, Marthy. There's ben a screw loose in it ever since you took sick."

"It's been a very happy world for me this afternoon, — with three people I love so much to welcome me back to it."

Abram's rough face looked radiant. "And you set my name along o' Reuben's an' Patty's? That 's somethin' to think of for a good while to come." He sat with both hands on his knees, his round blue eyes staring down into the fire, in such a reflective way that Martha waited for what more might be coming. "I wonder if it 's any kind of sign of old age to keep goin' back to the times when you was young?"

He said it in rather a questioning tone, and Martha answered: "Not of growing old, exactly. I think there 's a middle place when one 's done with feeling young, and it seems natural to look back at the pleasant days we 've had."

"I suppose that 's it. I don't feel old, — not so fur as work goes, I mean. But just let me set down quiet in front of the fire, an' I keep a thinkin' an' thinkin' — why, if I could recollect the 'rithmetic I learned at school 's well 's I do the fun we used to have Saturday afternoons, it would be a great savin' in shingles to do my figgerin' on, that 's all. Just now, Marthy, it come over me to remember the fust time I come here to tea — me an' Reuben Wilson when we

were little fellers, and you girls were goin' coastin' with us by moonlight. Pleasant times we had, that's a fact. Don't seem's if the young folks could quite come up to 'em, — 't any rate we none of us know how good it is while it's goin' on. The fust break was when Reuben went off to Californy. Landsakes, I've never forgot that night I must need go pilin' down on you when you two was havin' the beach all to yourselves. I wonder if you remember it, Marthy; you must have wished me to Jericho."

He had rambled on in his recollections, apparently without needing any assistance from Marthe; but here he looked up at her so regretfully that she could not help smiling, though a little sadly, as she said: "I recollect the evening well enough. Reuben had just been telling me that he was going away. I daresay it was just as well you should come and talk about something else · it was a hard piece of news to us both."

"An' the night the letter come from him — seem's if it had been my luck to come in on some of your hardest times, Marthy."

Grateful and calm as Martha felt to-night, old days were too tender a subject to bring up. She would have liked to tell Abram what was in store for her, and was sure of the happiness she should give him; but no risk must be run of even a passing pain to Patty by hearing anything from this afternoon's conversation suddenly. She would not have said even as much as she had done, had not Patty been busy in the next room; she had not seen her standing at the door while she and Abram exchanged these few words.

"You may always bear in mind," she said, "that there have been a great many other times, Abram, when things would have been almost too hard to bear if you had n't come in to help me. Now, I'm going to say good-night, for I know that I've done rather more than Dr. Perry would have given his leave for."

Patty saw her aunt safely settled in her room, and under Nora's care, before she came down to Abram, looking rather sober, he thought; but then she had had a long, anxious time, he said to himself, and he would do his best to cheer her up.

Patty might have felt as if there were some fatality attending her particular place in the old choir seats, if she had known how often her Aunt Martha had sat there with a heart even heavier than her own. The pathetic tones of poor little Ben Wilson's voice would have been a treasure to any boy-choir; and as he put his whole heart and soul into the plaintive, half-religious song, — one of the little collection that he had sung over to himself in so many weary hours, — Patty listened with slow-dropping tears. The concert over, singers and audience met in the church porch; but Patty's one idea was to get away from them all, and have Abram to herself on the way home for some questions that she felt she must ask before she saw Aunt Martha again. Reuben was there waiting to see his brother safe home, but he was the one of all she most wished to avoid; and when she saw him making his way toward her, told Abram that she must not wait a minute longer, and tried to escape through a side door. Reuben had caught sight of an unusual look upon her face, and was quite as determined in his desire to overtake her.

"I hope Martha was not any worse for having seen me?" he asked, anxiously.

Patty assured him that she seemed even brighter and better for it, and would have hurried away, but he detained her to say: "I thought you looked worried. Of course she seemed worse to me than she would to you, because you are used to seeing her." Then drawing her a little out of the crowd, and with voice and look that might have told his story even to one who had not already begun to read it, he said: "Patty, you don't think there is reason for any real alarm;—you are not anxious, are you?"

"No, indeed," Patty answered, emphatically. "Of course I worried in the beginning very much, but now — why, she must be better, or Dr. Perry would not let her come down-stairs again."

Reuben stood for a moment looking doubtful and unhappy; then, as he saw his mother helping Ben down the stairs, he went to join them, stopping an instant to say: "I shall come to-morrow, Patty. I must see her every day, whatever the doctor says."

Abram was quite disappointed in the hope he

had had of cheering Patty when he looked at the sober little face by his side as they trudged along in the snow. And filled with surprise was he when she spoke at last.

"I want very much to ask you a question; it's something I want to know very much."

"So long 's 't ain't anythin' out of a dictionary, I guess I shall be ekal to the occasion," Abram said.

"I don't think there is any one could tell me as well as you, — any one that I could ask, that is. I came in at the door just as you and Aunt Martha were talking about a walk on the beach and some letter that you brought. Did what you said to her mean that she and Reuben Wilson loved each other then?"

Martha's illness and the anxiety for her had made her so the one person to be thought about in these last weeks, that Abram had almost forgotten the idea connecting Reuben with Patty in his mind; now it all came back to him. She could not see his face, but she understood that for some reason it was hard for him to answer, and she said very earnestly, "It is n't curiosity, really. I love Aunt Martha dearly, and — and

— there is something I should like to say to her if I only felt sure.”

Abram felt very helpless. To have avoided giving pain to either Martha or Patty, I fear that he would not have limited himself to fact; but one way seeming as dangerous as another, he said to himself, “Abram, you old fool! more’n likely you’ll make a mess of it, whatever you do,” — and out loud — “I don’t seem to recollect just when it was that I came to think that Reuben was fond of Marthy, but I guessed it some way. It did n’t need no tellin’ to see that I might’s well have took a stick to her as give her that letter; I knew it said that Reuben was n’t comin’ back as soon’s she thought.”

“But I don’t understand,” Patty said, “why he did n’t tell her so when he came home, or perhaps” — she stopped as one little scene and another, unnoticed at the time, or put to the score of friendship, came up to her. Abram finished the sentence, “P’raps it was all so clear to them that they did n’t need to talk about it till such time’s they’d made up their minds just what to do.” That’s every bit I know, Patty; I dunno how I come to say’s much as I did to-

night ; only seein' her again made me go back to old times."

There was nothing more said by either on the way home. Abram was only too glad to keep a safe silence on a subject more puzzling to him than ever ; Patty's thoughts were busy going over the past months by the light thrown on them to-day.

After Patty had left her, Martha lay a long time, thinking of the tenderest, gentlest words in which she should tell her story ; but when at last the light footstep paused at her door she had fallen asleep. Patty thought what a calm, beautiful face it was as she stood looking down at her in the dim light of the night-lamp. But worn it certainly was ; no wonder that Reuben had been alarmed on seeing it for the first time. Then she sat down by the bedside, too full of anxious thought to sleep at present, trying to remember if she had said enough in her letters to prepare her mother for any change that she might see. Dear mother ! — she would try hard to make home happier for them all when she was there again. Whatever it might seem at first to herself, she would bear in mind all

that Aunt Martha had gone through before her.

While she was thinking she became aware that Martha's eyes were open. "Why, dear Patty is that you at home again? I must have gone to sleep without knowing it." The tears were still wet on Patty's cheeks, but in this light Martha could only see her pleasant smile as she told of how the evening had gone. "And Aunt Martha, Reuben was there, and sent his love to you; he said he would surely come to-morrow." Martha smiled happily. Then came to her the remembrance of what she had to tell Patty; she would rather put it off if it were not that this quiet dark hour seemed the best for them both, though the words were easier to think than to say aloud. Her lips had parted to speak, when Patty began with, "I wanted to tell you that I heard something that you and Abram were saying to each other this afternoon. I don't believe you would mind my hearing it, but I want you to know." Martha raised herself from her pillows a little; she could not speak at once, but put out her hand to Patty, who took it in both hers, and went on, "What

you said set me to thinking. It seems to me as if I must have been very dull ; you won't think I've been all taken up with my own pleasure not to have seen for myself how it was."

"My dear child, how could I think so? Why should I expect you to see anything more than that two old friends were meeting again?" Martha put her arm round Patty's neck, and drew her face beside her own on the pillow, "I've been lying awake to tell you, dear, what Reuben said to me to-day ; I think you 'll guess it now ; it's the end of a terrible long waiting."

When, with a loving good-night, Patty left her, Martha sank back upon the pillows with a feeling of gratitude, such as not even Reuben's persistent love had given her. To know that in the very first pain of disappointment Patty's heart had turned to her with sympathy for her past sorrow, was a comfort she had not dared to expect.

After this came days of peaceful happiness. Martha had promised Reuben that there should be no delay in their marriage, except for her sister's arrival. That would come very soon, and she had a great desire that Abby should be

with her ; it seemed to give her a sense of security that these two separations, which had come upon her at once, should end together. The end of a soft April day came, and Martha sat at her window watching. Patty had gone with Reuben to meet her mother at the station, and in another half hour they would all be with her. As he left her, Reuben had said : " Abby shall have you to herself till to-morrow, and then —— " She could still feel his kiss on her cheek, and closed her eyes as if to keep the memory of his look of love. The last rays of the sun shone upon her face, but her eyelids did not lift to watch his glorious setting. The sound of wheels bringing to her gate those she loved most never stirred her to welcome them. Even when her sister, kneeling before her, clasped and kissed the folded hands, there were no words of greeting ; for the heart so full of love for them all had ceased to beat.

The next day — their wedding day — Reuben sat alone in the room where she lay when Patty came to him.

" It's enough to break any one's heart," her mother had said, " to see him sit there with that

white, dreadful face, and she so still and peaceful ; and here's something I've just found in the secretary with his name written on it in her handwriting. Take it to him, Patty darling ; perhaps it will seem like a message to him ; he would rather take it from you than from anybody else."

So Patty went with the little package in her hand and stood by his side, wondering if it were possible that any one should feel more bereft than she herself at that moment, as she thought of this happiest time of her life gone from her and leaving no trace, when he spoke :—

"I did it all for the best ; but I've wasted both our lives." Patty scarcely felt sure that he was speaking to her, but she said through her tears, "She never would let you say that ; she told me herself that you'd done more with your life than any one she ever knew." "And I meant to have given all the rest of it to her—God knows I did !" Patty placed what she had brought him in his hand. He had not looked at her ; had not moved his eyes from Martha's face, but at her touch he turned. "Mother found this in the secretary. I think I know the

day that Aunt Martha must have written it." He looked in a dazed way at the writing. "Her letters were the only comfort I had once ; now this is the very last."

Patty's errand was accomplished, for she had broken the silence of his sorrow ; her hand had given him the message begging that for Martha there should be no life-long mourning. One day she was to read those words while her husband's eyes looked over the leaf with her ; then she would know that her secret had been kept, and she need not fear to tell him how long ago her love had been given.

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MANUFACTURERS AND MECHANICS INSTITUTE,
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